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Imperfect Indifference:

The Rhythm, Structure and Politics of Neutrality

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Résumé

Cette thèse propose l'émergence d'une *poésie de l'entre deux* dans la littérature expérimentale, en suivant ses développements du milieu du vingtième siècle jusqu'au début du vingt-et-unième. Cette notion d'entre-deux poétique se fonde sur une théorie du neutre (Barthes, Blanchot) comme ce qui se situe au delà ou entre l'opposition et la médiation. Le premier chapitre retrace le concept de monotonie dans la théorie esthétique depuis la période romantique où il est vu comme l'antithèse de la variabilité ou tension poétique, jusqu'à l'émergence de l'art conceptuel au vingtième siècle où il se déploie sans interruption. Ce chapitre examine alors la relation de la monotonie à la mélancolie à travers l'analyse de « The Anatomy of Monotony », poème de Wallace Stevens tiré du recueil *Harmonium* et l'œuvre poétique *alphabet* de Inger Christensen. Le deuxième chapitre aborde la réalisation d'une poésie de l'entre-deux à travers une analyse de quatre œuvres poétiques qui revisitent l'usage de l'index du livre paratextuel: l'index au long poème *"A"* de Louis Zukofsky, « Index to Shelley's Death » d'Alan Halsey qui apparait à la fin de l'oeuvre *The Text of Shelley's Death*, *Cinema of the Present* de Lisa Robertson, et l'oeuvre multimédia *Via* de Carolyn Bergvall. Le troisième chapitre retrace la politique de neutralité dans la théorie de la traduction. Face à la logique oppositionnelle de l'original contre la traduction, il propose hypothétiquement la réalisation d'une troisième texte ou « l'entre-deux », qui sert aussi à perturber les récits familiers de l'appropriation, l'absorption et l'assimilation qui effacent la différence du sujet de l'écrit. Il examine l'oeuvre hybride *Secession with Insecession* de Chus Pato et Erin Moure comme un exemple de poésie de l'entre-deux. A la fois pour Maurice Blanchot et Roland Barthes, le neutre représente un troisième terme potentiel qui défie le paradigme de la pensée oppositionnelle. Pour Blanchot, le neutre est la différence amenée au point de l'indifférence et de l'opacité de la transparence tandis que le désire de Barthes pour le neutre est une utopie lyrique qui se situe au-delà des contraintes de but et de marquage. La conclusion examine comment le neutre correspond au conditions de liberté gouvernant le principe de créativité de la poésie comme l'acte de faire sans intention ni raison.

Mots-clés : monotonie, mélancolie, neutre, fragment, poésie moderne, poésie expérimentale, poésie du XXe siècle, poésie du XXI siècle, poésie conceptuelle, l'index du livre, traduction, paratexte, poiesis

Abstract

This dissertation proposes the emergence of a poetry of the threshold in experimental literature, tracing its development from the mid-twentieth century to the early twenty-first century. The notion of threshold poetry is premised on a theory of the neutral (Barthes, Blanchot) as that which is located beyond or between opposition or mediates. Chapter One retraces the concept of monotony in aesthetic theory, from the Romantic period, where it figures as the antithesis to changefulness or poetic tension, to the emergence of conceptual art in the twentieth century. Chapter One further examines the relationship of monotony to melancholy through an analysis of "The Anatomy of Monotony" by Wallace Stevens and *alphabet* by Inger Christensen. Chapter Two proposes a 'poetry of the threshold' through an analysis of four works of experimental, paratextually structured works of poetry: Louis Zukofsky's index to *"A"*; Alan Halsey's "Index to Shelley's Death," which comes after *The Text of Shelley's Death*; Lisa Robertson's *Cinema of the Present*; and Carolyn Bergvall's multimedia work *Via.* Chapter Three retraces the politics of neutrality in translation theory. Against the oppositional logic of original versus translation, it hypothetically proposes the realization of a 'third' or threshold text, which also serves to disrupt the familiar narratives of appropriation, absorption and assimilation that efface the difference of the writing subject. It examines the hybrid work *Secession with Insecession* by Chus Pato and Erin Moure as an example of threshold poetry. For both Maurice Blanchot and Roland Barthes, the neutral represents a potential third term that baffles the paradigm of oppositional thought. For Blanchot, the neutral is difference taken to the point of indifference and the opacity of transparency while Barthes' desire for the neutral is for a lyrical utopia that is located beyond the constraints of purpose and marketability. The conclusion examines how the neutral corresponds to the conditions of freedom governing the creative principle of poiesis as the act of making without intention or purpose.

Keywords: monotony, melancholy, neutrality, the fragment, 20th-century poetry, early 21st-century poetry, conceptual poetry, experimental poetry, translation, paratext, book indexes, poiesis

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Introduction

Introduction

The *neutral* is often seen as the answer or alternative to a conflict or opposition. In political conflicts, the neutral nation may be called upon to negotiate. Neutral zones are delineated for refugees who have become stateless as a result of conflict. Even in quotidian moments and in situations of relative peace and stability, an idea of the neutral is invoked to unify a scene. In fashion, the neutral is called upon to balance an ensemble, even as it points beyond the colour spectrum, achromatic. Speaking in a neutral voice is professional and also appropriate in certain situations, whether to demonstrate scientific detachment or to present facts seemingly with rational control under conditions of legal constraint. Whether in the face of toxicity or terror, the neutral response or the response of neutralization is expressed to affirm that a situation has been contained.[1] Neutral nations, neutral zones, neutral solutions, neutralized agents and situations — the neutral designates a position or place we aspire to and that we approach when there is no other option or when there is nowhere else to turn. The neutral zone represents both the non-place and non-presence of place, the condition of being *without* place, *without* bias.

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[1] For example, following terrorist attacks in Europe in 2015, leaders repeatedly reassured the public that the threat had been or will be *neturalized*. In a speech on November 14, 2015, François Hollande evoked a solution of 'neutralization' as a political euphemism for the elimination or containment of criminal actors behind acts of terrorism, as reported in *Le Monde*: "Nous avons, sur ma décision, mobilisé toutes les forces possibles pour qu'il puisse y avoir la neutralisation des terroristes et la mise en sécurité de tous les quartiers qui peuvent être concernés." Similarly, in August 2015, after the Thalys train attack, officials reported that the terrorist threat had been 'neutralized.'

This dissertation examines the problematic of the *neutral* according to three central axes: 1) the rhythm of neutrality; 2) the structure of neutrality; and 3) the politics of neutrality. The literary objects examined are works of twentieth- to twenty-first-century poetry. The three central axes can be briefly summarized as follows. First, in Chapter One, "Stylized Monotony: The Rhythm of Neutrality," I set out to map a poetic history of the notion of *monotony* as the quiet antithesis to the aesthetic notion of *tension*, from the time when romantic aesthetics flourished to the present. Here, in the field of rhythm, neutrality is expressed as an aspect of monotony and thereby assumes an impenetrable form — an unchanging, unbreaking form that has neither beginning nor end, is without variance, and by extension is produced at a remove from the realm of judgment as facilitated by impartiality. This chapter is also concerned with the problem of neutrality as indifference — as a condition of controlled or effaced affect — and as an aesthetic and ethical problem. In the second chapter, I approach the concept of neutrality through a discussion of database forms and other structures of apparent subjective impartiality, including the alphabet itself, by considering the deployment of "reference genres" in literary experiments (e.g. lists, catalogues and other paratextual forms).[2] Here, the neutral corresponds to a condition of subjective detachment that is either productive or dangerous, depending on the position of the scriptor. Thus, Chapter Two, "Playing the Index: The Structure of Neutrality," is about the desire for detachment and objectivity as a constituting

[2] In *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age,* Ann M. Blair uses the phrase "reference genre" to designate a wide range of bibliographic reference materials, from dictionaries and *florilegia* to the alphabetical index, the branching diagram, the catalogue, etc. The notion of the paratext is defined by Gérard Genette as any threshold textual element, such as an index, title, table of contents, etc.

gesture, and for a liberatory poetic-aesthetic gesture that disrupts a binary logical paradigm to forge new associations through the seemingly neutral ordering of poetic fragments. Finally, in the third chapter, "One More Word: Translation and the Politics of Neutrality," I argue that the problem of neutrality represents an impasse of translation theory and translation itself, where neutrality, as an aspect of transparency, figures as a corollary to the problem of invisibility. Here, I am concerned specifically with the translator's invisibility, a condition of effacement produced through an emphasis on readily-legible, generic language usage and voice, the idea that the translator's voice itself leaves no residue, and that the translator does not intervene in what he or she says.[3] Thus, Chapter Three is about the limiting desire for seamlessness and transparency in works of translation, underscored in any context of imperialism and specifically, English-language hegemonies. Here, a desire for transparency supports the appropriation and assimilation of the foreign at the risk of difference and at the risk of literature itself — which, as Deleuze notes, always already speaks in a foreign language. Overall, this dissertation problematizes the position of the impartial and the indifferent within contemporary poetics where neutrality figures as both a literary and political trope.

Notably, by extension, *neutrality* can also be construed as a key problematic of the discipline of Comparative Literature and studies in Intermediality. By definition, Comparative Literature is a discipline that is resistant to narratives of assimilation and appropriation as it recognizes there is no language usage that can be simply reduced to the neutral, and that there

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[3] While the neutral figures indisputably as an aspect of transparency, it should not be reduced entirely to this matter: "Let us then also say that if transparency has the neutral as its trait, the neutral does not belong to it; it is not a neutral of transparency." Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, Trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 303.

is no neutral translation or instance of transmission since borders are charged sites. In short, no one and nothing crosses a border unchanged. In parallel, the field of Intermediality studies is founded on the argument that no medium is a transparent or neutral platform and undertakes to foreground the embodiment of transmission in all its forms. The material condition of an object and its propensity to decay or disintegrate are not secondary, not mere technical aspects of the work, nor are the conditions of its dissemination and circulation. If neither language nor medium is ever neutral in these respects, every literary object returns us to its primary specificity, and the act of comparison demands a continual renewal of the position from which and against which the comparative gesture arises and extends.

Neutral arises etymologically from the Latin *neutralis*, as that which is grammatically neither masculine nor feminine, but also as something intransitive: that which produces no effect on any object and shapes no outcome. Although the earliest usage of this Latin word bears a strictly grammatical denotation, it re-emerges in English in the Renaissance in a political context as the notion of a neutral nation or community, "not taking part in a war (1536), not taking sides in a dispute (*c*1600)."[4] Thus, the *neutral* comes to represent a non-position in a conflict and an expression of non-participation: "They that tooke part with neither of them, were called Newtralles."[5] To speak of a neutral group or nation is to define that group in relation to a conflict, even though it is the refusal to participate in the conflict that earns such a group this designation. In terms of nationhood, which is defined by external opposition

[4] "neutral, n. and adj.". *OED Online*. December 2015. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/126457?redirectedFrom=neutral&. (accessed December 11, 2015).

[5] *Ibid.*

and an internally binding grammar of belonging, it is questionable whether any group could properly be designated as a nation if its definitive characteristic were neutrality: a consistent non-position leading to non-participation. This is the paradoxical position of the neutral, whether considered in its original sense as a non-gendered expression (the *neuter* that is neither one nor the other) or in terms of juridico-political *neutrality*: the neutral expresses a position that is somehow *beyond* a conflict or opposition, a position that is a non-position, the position of a 'one' that is not part of a conflict but that remains irrevocably defined by the conflict as a passive, uninscribed surface, an absence of presence, a negative definition.

In this sense, the neutral is reducible to a 'one' that exists without comparison because it stands outside opposition, and therefore as a singularity that is either beyond opposition or one that is between opposing forces and mediates impartially. Whether the neutral is positioned *beyond* or *between* opposites emerges as a point of contention that can be examined in an exchange of dialogue in Plato's *Gorgia*s (468A), where the term '*μεταξύ*' is posited in a relationship with good and morality where it is distinct from the opposition between bad and good. Not contrary to the moral good, '*μεταξύ* is translated in different translations as either "intermediate," "indifferent," or "neutral" in the selections that follow: "Then, do people do these *intermediate* things, when they do them, for the sake of the good things, or the good things for the *intermediate*?"[6] "Socrates: Are these *indifferent* things done for the sake of the good or the good for the sake of the *indifferent*?"[7] Or, "Socrates: Are these *neutral* activities

[6] Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias*. Trans. W. R. M. Lamb (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1925), 329.

[7] Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato*. Trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Random House, 1937), 526.

done for the sake of the good or does the good exist for the sake of what is *neutral*?"[8] Among these variable translations for *μεταξύ* emerges the Platonic view of the medium as a site of passive neutrality that is not inscribed with difference. In "On Touch and Life in the *De Anima,*" Long translates *μεταξύ* as medium and elsewhere as what exists in-between, a transparency that despite its apparent lack of appearance is neither an absence nor emptiness.[9]

The neutral that exists *beyond* comparison avoids conflict altogether. This face of the neutral as way "d'esquiver le conflitual" [of dodging the conflictual], or "prendre la tangente" [taking something on the bias], forms the fundamental problematic of Roland Barthes' series of lectures at the Collège de France, given shortly before his death, on the topic of *le neutre* (a concept that was at the center of his life's work, as seen clearly in *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*).[10] In *Le Neutre* Barthes argues that the "l'évitement du conflit est fondamentalement annulé, frappé de néant, par l'idéologie occidentale" [avoidance of conflict is fundamentally annulled, reduced to nothing by Western ideology] because it involves assuming one of two unsupportable positions: a position of pure ignorance (avoidance) or a

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[8] Plato, *Gorgias*, Trans. Benjamin Jowett, revised by Albert A. Anderson (Mills, Massachusetts: Agora Publications, 1994), 31.

[9] Christopher P. Long. "On Touch and Life in De Anima." *Phenomenology and the Metaphysics of Sight.* Vol. 13. Eds. Antonio Cimino and Pavlos Kontos, 69-94.

[10] Roland Barthes, *Le Neutre: Cours au Collège de France (1977-1978),* Ed. Thomas Clerc. Seuil/IMEC, 2002) 167; Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*, Trans. Rosalind Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: University of Columbia Press, 2005), 127. Throughout this introduction, when referring to this text in English translation, I have used Krauss and Hollier's translation.

contradictory position (accepting the arguments of both sides). An ideology that is formed on conflict pre-emptively eliminates the possibility of an area beyond conflict as anything but an avoidance of the facts or an illogical accretion of contradictory arguments resulting in absurdity.

Thus for Barthes the neutral comes to represent a *glissement* or slipping away from binary logic, the zero or third term he alludes to in *Le degré zero de l'écriture*: "Writing degree zero is a third term — the neutral appears between two terms of polar opposition (a third term or zero element)."[11] Yet, even as the neutral appears between terms of opposition, it points beyond that opposition to another possibility. In *Le Neutre*, Barthes thus expresses his thesis on the neutral as "tout ce qui déjoue le paradigme" (that which foils or frustrates the paradigm), by which paradigm, he means the opposition of two virtual terms — any logic formed on binary opposition: "l'opposition de deux termes virtuels dont j'actualise l'un pour parler, pour produire du sens."[12] In *Writing Degree Zero*, Barthes traces the origins of the neutral in writing to Sartre and Camus, where it originates, he argues, as a mode of innocence rather than a strategy for escaping opposition or conformity.[13] While this understanding of the

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[11] Roland Barthes. *Writing Degree Zero*. Trans. Rosalind Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: University of Columbia Press, 2005), 76.

[12] Barthes, *Le Neutre*, 31.

[13] Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero,* 67. Elsewhere, Shoshana Feldman notes the "naïve, idealistic faith in witnessing" embodied in Camus' *The Plague*. (Shoshana Feldman, *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), xviii.) As I discuss below, the figure of the witness is of great importance to the place of the neutral in literature, which position

neutral removes it from the condition of ignorance or mere avoidance of opposition, the innocence sought is yet defined against given structures of knowledge and therefore in relation to it, as an emergent *between* rather than *beyond*. Bernard Comment notes Barthes' persistent efforts to explore such a third or zero element:

> Ce débordement de l'opposition, cette façon d'infléchir la force du sens vers des zones d'inquiétude et d'indécidablité, tout cela doit se lire comme un refus du sens tel qu'il est normé et imposé. La logique oppositionnelle (réglée par le principe de non-contradiction) doit être troublée pour produire un premier ébranlement de la machine sémantique, et un premier pas vers le Neutre.[14]

Thus, Comment paraphrases a thesis that informs all of Barthes' work on the neutral, from *Writing Degree Zero* to *The Neutral*, his last work: oppositional logic must be disrupted so that the semantic machine can shudder toward the neutral. While Barthes' writing on this topic remains predominantly concerned with questions related to linguistics, it shares some momentum with certain radical art movements in art in the twentieth century, which gravitated primarily away from a monolithic view of representation, a coextensivity of movement portending a future re-examination of the neutral.

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necessitates, as Barthes' envisions it, an ethical approach to "minimizing one's interface with the world's arrogance." (Barthes, *The Neutral*, 129). Such a position can be seen in the objectivist tradition in American poetry, for example, notably in the work of Charles Reznikoff.

[14] Bernard Comment, *Roland Barthes, vers le neutre* (Paris: Éditions Christian Bourgois, 1991, 2002), 56.

As stated, in Chapter One, I trace a movement toward monotony in the twentieth century as art and literature purports to remove itself from a history of aesthetic idealism and to liberate itself from the tyranny of beauty. If, in the nineteenth century, monotony figures only as a necessary, albeit unpleasant or ugly, part of an economy of deferred aesthetic pleasure, by the mid 1950s with colour field painting and conceptual art, monotony fills the space of beauty with its own relinquished authority. Simultaneous to this anti-aesthetic movement away from expressionism and symbolism, the author/artists' identity is decentralized, allowing for a participatory experience of art. Just as the notion of a singular subjective position is decentered, the very possibility of expression, in accordance with its conditions as generated by a notion of romantic self-expression, becomes suspect. The blank page or canvas imparts nothing other than what is conveyed in the encounter or the instant of experience. While what it imparts may be infinitely multiple and various, there is nothing on the outside of experience that can be impartially imparted, so to speak, across time.

Yet minimalist art, despite anti-aesthetic trends, would continue to be described in aesthetic terms by critics, an issue Barthes takes up in the passage below, where he argues with the description of American "minimal art" as suggested by *Encyclopedia Universalis* on the following terms: [15]

[15] From the footnotes to *The Neutral* (English translation), the *Encylopedia Universalis* entry Barthes was referring to here offered the following definition for minimalist art: "Anti-expressionist before anything else, intent on neutralizing form and color, minimal art uses extremely simple and readable figures that are multiplied to the infinite."

> De mon point de vue, l'assimilation du Neutre et du minimal est un contresens 1) parce que le Neutre n'abolit pas l'affect mais seulement le conduit […] 2) parce que le neutre minimaliste ne concerne pas l'esthétique, mais seulement l'éthique.[16]

Here, Barthes argues that the desired neutral does not erase affect. Indeed, in the case of conceptual, anti-expressionist art, affect can circulate with great intensity, as I discuss in Chapter Two, "Playing the Index: The Structure of Neutrality." Chapter Two considers literary poetic works comprised of fragments that are arranged in alphabetical order. This is a paratextual style that points to a strategy of neutralization that involves a distance from the experience of one particular subject and thereby from the constraints placed on language in the name of communication. Because this poetry borrows the paratextual index, a genre usually reserved for the data associated with the book, it is a poetry of the threshold, provoking a defamiliarization not only of the threshold or paratexual element but also of the book itself. Ironically, if neutrality is usually associated with the objective imparting of information, neutrality appears in these literary works as the absence of any imperative to inform or communicate information with paratextual elements. Chapter Two is primarily concerned with the emergence of a third or neutral element that disrupts oppositional structures of narrative sequence and linear expression by means of a turn to an arbitrary or neutral systemic logic. In particular, I discuss Louis Zukofsky's index to *"A,"* Alan Halsey's "An Index to Shelley's Death," and Lisa Robertson's *Cinema of the Present*, all of which are literary works where the individual fragments, lines or pieces are arranged in alphabetical order.

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[16] Barthes, *Le Neutre*, 249.

In the final part of Chapter Two, in relation to the work of Carolyn Bergvall (*Via* in particular), I question Kenneth Goldsmith's claim that "It is the objective of the author who is concerned with conceptual writing to make her work mentally interesting to the reader, and therefore usually she would want it to become emotionally dry," a statement that calls for the neutralization of affective transmission in poetry.[17] My argument, developed below, is twofold. First, I argue that if affect cannot be reduced to expressionist notions and does not merely originate in the speaking subject in the first place, then it is neither in the artist's purvey nor capacity either to control or eliminate affect. Secondly, I argue that the conceptual artist's position of neutrality risks becoming reduced to one of mere indifference if the framework of a performance operates without taking into account the voice of the other.

Any claim to eliminate affect from art is problematically reductive, misconstruing affect as a simple expressionist phenomenon, as a set of feelings that originate with a singular subject, the genius or maker. As Sara Ahmed argues in the *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, affects do not originate or belong to individuals, but rather travel and are sticky. As such, they are contagious, circulate, and in the process become attached. Accordingly, it would be impossible for a work to be made devoid of affect by its author, if only its author's feelings were to be withheld. This is due in part to the very participatory nature of the poststructuralist experience of art or writing, which de-emphasizes the position of the author in determining a work's meaning and significance. In other words, a work of art can be a site of sticky affects even if the author has not poured his or her own feelings into it.

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[17] Kenneth Goldsmith, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Writing," accessed on October 1, 2015, http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/conceptual_paragraphs.html.

Secondly, what are the ethical implications of assuming a position as an artist or author that presupposes that once can effectively eliminate affect from a work: a position that is devoid of any gesture of social or collective responsibility, even in terms of the ancillary framework for the writing or performance? Such indifference has the capacity to produce sensationalism, which serves to bring the author of sensationalism into the spotlight. But what else?

American poet Sueyeun Juliette Lee addresses the place of the ethical in forms of contemporary experimental writing that rely on appropriation and transcription in an article titled "Shock and Blah: Offensive Postures in 'Conceptual' Poetry and the Traumatic Stuplime."[18] To establish an important point of contrast, Lee looks back to the major documentary poetic works of Charles Reznikoff (particularly of importance here are *Testimony: The United States, 1885-1915* and *Holocaust*) and notes a striking difference between Rezinkoff's position and that of the contemporary poets who have recently reclaimed him.[19] First, however, she notes the obvious similarity: Reznikoff's reliance on transcription

[18] Sueyeun Juliette Lee, "Shock and Blah: Offensive Postures in 'Conceptual' Poetry and the Traumatic Stuplime," *Volta* 41 (May 2014). http://www.thevolta.org/ewc41-sjlee-p1.html. As to what constitutes the contemporary 'conceptual' poetry Lee's argument refers to, Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith's *Anthology of Conceptual Writing* is one definitive source.

[19] The first volume of Reznikoff's *Testimony* was published in 1965 by New Directions, but was widely attacked in critical reviews. In one of these, "Hayden Carruth said that the "cold, neutral language" makes *Testimony* "uninteresting" and "lifeless." New Directions as a result dropped its options on the sequel volumes and indeed on any of Reznikoff's future works; he was thus driven to publish the second volume of *Testimony: The United States, 1891-1900: Recitative* himself, in 1968."

neutralizes the writing subject. Also, as an objectivist, Reznikoff's work is constructed from materials that originate outside the experience of the writing subject, and nowhere in his text does an expression of subjective opinion emerge except in his choice of what materials to present and how to arrange them.[20] Yet, Lee argues, what sets Reznikoff's gesture apart is his *intention to bear witness* to injustice and atrocity. Implied in this differentiation is a critique of indifference — such a critique as Barthes' distinction between superficial indifference (in which he is not interested) and the desirable *neutral* he names. Lee's argument, a plea for the ethical intentions that inform the act of bearing witness, imply a neutralization of the writing subject, which makes space for the other's voice to be heard, but a neutralization that does not assume a posture of indifference. Reznikoff's work is highly effective as its unrelenting revelation of the facts of suffering hone an affective response to injustice through accretion and repetition. It does not arise from indifference to violence, nor is it a monotony of violence, so routine it is absorbed numbly and dumbly into the system. The neutrality afforded by Reznikoff's objectivist removal in his later works relates to Barthes' description of the neutral ethic as "minimizing an interface with the world's arrogance."[21] The decentered subject

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Milton Hindus, "Charles Reznikoff Biography," http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/charles-reznikoff.

[20] Notably, Rezinkoff's work was the object of a 1927 essay by Zukofsky, "Sincerity and Objectification," where Zukofsky first developed his ideas that would later come to be under the label 'objectivism;' Louis Zukofsky, "Sincerity and Objectification," *Poetry* 35 No. 5, (Feb 1931): 272-285.

[21] Barthes, *Le Neutre*, 249. "Il pourrait en effet y avoir une pensée minimaliste du Neutre : ce minimalisme se situerait ainsi : un style de conduit qui tend à diminuer le surface de contact du sujet avec l'arrogance du monde […]"

differentiates along an axis that neutralizes the potential indifference of neutrality: this is the decentering of the authorial voice. Throughout this process, Reznikoff's remains a position that does not abolish the notion of care, which is where, Lee argues, a new generation of conceptual poets risks faltering, using methods of transcription similar to Reznikoff, yet assuming a position of uncaring indifference, a supposed non-position. If neutrality is mere indifference, we are left with a poetics that derides the very compulsion to care about the world and the voice of the other and thus serves only to perpetuate the violence it represents.

At times, the evocation of unbiased neutrality can also act in the service of a position (for example, of ignorance) to excuse or mask a stance that is, rather, biased — as a way to hide bias within the mechanisms and inaction of apathy. Thus, since neutrality is understood as a passive, non-judgmental position, as that which produces no effect on any object and shapes no outcome, it risks exploitation as a conveniently easy position of concealment (the opacity of transparency, as Blanchot writes). For example, in response to and in critique of the unfair omission of Barbara Guest's poetry from an early anthology that helped define the circle of poets known as the New York School (a group of poets among which Guest and her writing had played a central formative role), Rachel Blau Duplessis argues against the blithe ignorance of those responsible for this erasure: "reception and dissemination are never neutral phenomena, and the familiar bumbling can always occur ('Gee, honey, I lost women's writing')."[22] In this sense, retreating under the shelter of the neutral does not guarantee

[22] Rachel Blau Duplessis, "The Gendered Marvelous: Barbara Guest, Surrealism and Feminist Reception," in *Blue Studios* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 167.

impartiality on part of the actor who poses as unaccountable or a non-participant: here, the neutral is only indifference.

Barthes' definition of the neutral, he claims, is "structural," seeking a conceptual order beyond the limits of opposition. Temporally, the neutral is an idea for a structure that is not linear, not founded upon the opposition of past to present, not bound to the linear narratives of progress. The neutral establishes itself as pure duration beyond the constraints of origin/beginning and finality/closure. Indeed, the desire for the neutral informs not only the content but the structure of the text of "Barthes' last book," published posthumously — a text that was composed as a series of lecture notes on the neutral, but written against the constraints of publication, as a desire for the ephemeral, unintended for the book market. (For Barthes, the truly neutral would not be marketable.[23]) In one aspect, like Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, the book *Le Neutre* is a collection of writings presented posthumously in a catalogue form. Also, Barthes' text incorporates marginal key words to guide the reader. For Barthes, not only the content but the form of this non-linear collection of writings furthers his argument against what he describes as the "dissertation style," which of course, remains mired in a mode of critique and oppositional ideology. For Barthes, the neutral represents a beautiful idea, an impossible yet potential alternative to conflict, a utopia, a longed-for state of androgyny, an unmarketable passion and desire.

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[23] Barthes, *Le Neutre*, 39. "En règle générale, le désir est toujours vendable : nous ne faisons que vendre, acheter, échanger des désirs. Le paradoxe du désir de Neutre, sa singularité absolue, est qu'il est invendable → on me dit : « Vous ferez un livre avec ce cours sur le Neutre ? » Tout autre problème mis à part (notamment de performance), je réponds : Non, le Neutre, c'est l'invendable."

Thus, Barthes' writings on the neutral are disinterested in the notion of a bleak *indifference* or *impartiality* that is often associated with neutrality; Barthes is concerned, rather, with documenting a burning, passionate intensity: a desire for the neutral.[24] While I share Barthes' longing, mine is rather melancholic; this is where my desire for the neutral departs from his. The matters of aesthetics — or, more specifically, contemporary conditions of irrecoverable beauty in matters of creation — are indispensible to my investigation of poetry. Furthermore, if beauty were to crack the surface of indifference, this long-sought neutral might be glimpsed, seeping thus through any imperfect indifference. Indifference, although pervasive, is merely a posture, a façade, a surface, a way of saying, "I don't care," or "whatever," an insincere posture, a simplistic style of deriding the meaningful in all of its forms. It's only when this façade breaks, and in its failure the fragile, vulnerable beauty of multiplied possibility cracks through, that the neutral emerges as a desirable presence, as possibility intensified.

Therefore, somewhere between this social façade of neutrality that is indifference, draping the landscape of the world with its bleak surface, and the neutral as a zero or third way through unchartered waters of logic and conformity, there is a *glissement* or slippage away from the competing interests of individualistic and collective will. The neutral remains elusive, an absence of absence that does not affirm its presence, the opacity of transparency, or the difference of indifference, as Blanchot describes it. Barthes' work on the neutral draws on the thought of Maurice Blanchot, whose extensive writings on the neutral are collected in

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[24] Barthes, *Le Neutre*, 38. "En raccourci: je désire le Neutre, donc je postule le Neutre. Qui désire, postule (hallucine)."

L'entretien infini [*The Infinite Conversation*]. As for Barthes, in Blanchot's work, the neutral points to the elusive third term that complicates and disrupts binary logic. As Blanchot writes in *L'entretien Infini*:

> Le neutre : cela qui porte la différence jusque dans l'indifférence, plus justement, qui ne laisse pas l'indifférence à son égalité définitive. Le neutre, toujours séparé du neutre par le neutre, loin de laisser expliquer par l'identique, reste le surplus inidentifiable. Le neutre : surface et profondeur, ayant partie liée avec la profondeur si la surface semble régir, avec la surface quand la profondeur dominer (devient un vouloir qui domine), la rendant alors superficielle tout en l'enfonçant. Le neutre est toujours ailleurs qu'on ne le situe […][25] [The neutral: that which carries difference even to the point of indifference. More precisely, that which does not leave indifference to its definitive equalization. The neutral is always separated from the neutral by the neutral, and, far from allowing itself to be examined by the identical, it remains and unidentifiable surplus. The neutral: surface and depth, casting its lot with depth when the surface seems to rule, and with the surface when depth seeks to dominate (that is, become a dominating will), thus rendering it superficial all the while pushing it under. The neutral is always elsewhere that where one would situate it […][26]

The third or zero element that Barthes theorizes in *Writing Degree Zero* finds a correlate in the figure of the neutral in Blanchot's work, where it is continually evoked to disrupt binaries or facilitate a slippage in oppositional logic. In Chapter 3, "One More Word: Translation and the Politics of Neutrality," the concept of the third term takes the form of a

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[25] Maurice Blanchot, *L'entretien infini*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 450.

[26] Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 305.

hypothetical third text that situates itself in relation to two texts that are perceived as the original and its translation. This third text is located both between and beyond the two texts it measures. The third text exists as that against which the original and the translation can measure themselves, since the original and the translation cannot be measured directly against each other, as Paul Ricoeur argues in *Sur la traduction*:

> Le dilemme est le suivant : les deux textes de départ et d'arrivée devraient, dans une bonne traduction, être mesurés par un troisième texte inexistant. Le problème, c'est en effet de dire la même chose ou de prétendre dire la même chose de deux façons différentes. Mais ce même, cet identique n'est donné nulle part à la façon d'un tiers texte dont le statut serait celui du troisième homme dans le *Parménide* de Platon, tiers entre l'idée de l'homme et les échantillons humains supposés participer à l'idée vraie et réelle. À défaut de ce texte tiers, où résiderait le sens même, l'identique sémantique, il n'y a pour seul recours que la lecture critique de quelques spécialistes sinon polyglottes du moins bilingue [….][27]

When a translation is measured against the original text, it always appears to be flawed if not to fail massively. Not only is there no way to measure the meaning of a living language, there is no way to prove any simple equivalency of given terms in one language to terms in another language. Therefore, the perfect translation must, paradoxically, point to its original incommensurability, to the impossibility of equivalence that renders every translation spurious in advance of its production. Ricoeur's notion of the hypothetical third text is a realization of the slippage between a text in one language and its translation in another. In Chapter Three, I argue that *Secession with Insecession* by Chus Pato and Erin Moure

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[27] Paul Ricoeur, *Sur la traduction* (Paris: Bayard, 2004), 14.

accomplishes the task of pointing to its own slippage. Here, the third text — which takes the literal form of a third text, written by Erin Moure in response to the text by Chus Pato that she has translated, and laid-out on facing pages opposite the translation — inscribes the voice of the translator as an indisputable presence, a third reverberation of a complicated passage, a threshold of crossings.

As Moure's third text draws attention to the composing voice of the translator, it also draws attention to the decentered subject of the lyrical *I* who writes. For who writes *Secession with Insecession*? Is it Pato or Moure or the reader who writes across the gutter of the page, across that faint shadow of a border separating Pato's text from Moure's? The third text also draws attention to cultural difference (where on the left, Moure's *I* embodies a Canadian nationalist perspective and on the right, Moure translates Pato's *I* and Galician nationalist perspective): variegated lines and complex layers of subjectivity that emerge in any process of translation. Importantly, Moure's gesture resists a climate of indifference to cultural difference within translation practices, resists the gestures of absorption, assimilation and neutralization that govern translation in North America. Instead, the translator inscribes her presence, a visible subjectivity, against prevailing customs according to which the translator's very name is often elided or eclipsed entirely by reviewers and the reading public. This is in part because the translator (although he or she may own the copyright to a work of translation) is not perceived as the author of that work but rather as a sort of machine that has reproduced a text in a new language.[28] Emily Apter argues that the translator remains in the shadow of the

[28] Or, the translator is not a machine, but more specifically, the ghost in the machine: "In habitual parlance about literary works in translation, the translator is the ghost in the machine, and the one who

creator or author of a work as a result of the patterns of possession that underwrite literary circulation and scholarship in general:

> […] one reason why literary studies falls short as anti-capitalist critique is because it insufficiently questions what it means to "have" a literature or to lay claim to aesthetic property. Literary communities are gated: according to Western law and international statute, authors *have* texts, publishers *have* a universal right to translate (as long as they pay), and nations *own* literary patrimony as cultural inheritance. Translation, seen as authorized plagiarism, emerges as a form of creative property that belongs fully to no one.[29]

That the translation "belongs fully to no one" — even if the translator formally owns the copyright to his or her work — should present a fruitful challenge to capitalist limits imposed on collective textual ownership; however, in reality, the translator is most often forgotten or glossed over, their part in a partial ownership unacknowledged.

That the translator can be so easily elided shows how a significant strain of indifference to cultural difference dominates the fields of literary circulation. Indeed, such a position of indifference to difference is often internalized and assumed by translators themselves, where it manifests a style of translation that seeks to erase any marks of

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wrote them in the first language is the person we call the Author. But, this Author, in fact, enacts nothing in the translation. The ghost does it all." Erin Moure, "Cotranslating Nicole Brossard: Three-Way Spectacle or Spectre de Trois?" in *Translating Translating Montreal* (Montreal: Press Dust, 2007), 35.

[29] Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), 15.

foreignness from the translated text. In this situation, the translator seeks to make a text that is readily marketable and easily readable in the target language at the expense of the specificity of the text, the very specificity that qualifies it as literature. Often, these marks of difference might be eradicated or neutralized in translation. To render such a surface that is indifferent to difference — a slick and easy surface — the translator must resort to flattening the intensity of the original, presumably in the name of communication or intelligibility. Yet, the "aura" of the original is not only an expression of literary intensity, but also of an irrecoverable specificity that is its uncontested difference. A slick translation is considered suspect and contentious because it is superficial and indifferent to the difference of the author. Taken the other way, the translator might choose to render the text so different or strange as to be indifferent to the difference of the reader in the target language. These two opposed movements — the first according to which the translator makes the translated text slick (easy to read, culturally familiar in the target language) and the second, according to which the translator makes the translated text sticky (strange and a challenge to read in the target language) — can be summed up by a description offered by Friedrich Schleiermacher in *On the Different Methods of Translating* originally published in 1813. Schleiermacher famously posited that the translator faces one major dilemma: whether to bring the writer closer to the reader by making the translated text as familiar to the reader as possible, or to make the reader travel to the writer by rendering the translated text strange to the reader and thereby allowing the difference of the original text to affect changes on the target language.

These possibilities are elaborated upon by Lawrence Venuti's in his theory of the translator's invisibility. Venuti argues that the translator faces a choice between two possible methods or approaches to their work. These he names as domestication versus foreignization,

where domestication involves rendering the text familiar and easy to read (slick) in the target language and foreignization involves using strategies that render the target language strange. Domestication involves a gesture of cultural assimilation that renders the translator's voice, as mediator between cultures, invisible; a process of containment or neutralization. Foreignization is a process by which the translator must operate with a degree of creativity or poetic license to bend the target language, just as any literary text bends its language of origin.

Finally, my argument on translation is based on the idea that every literary text arises as a trembling in the language of origin, as potential difference that is both a unique utterance and an expression of the language in which it is written, an unusual intensity. The writer is a foreigner inside the language of origin, experiencing that language as difference and disrupting its clichés. This forms the basis of Deleuze' argument in the essay "Bégaya-t-il…": any literature is written as a trembling within a given language, a unique or minor usage of language within a given language. This "new language" does not arise outside a given language; rather, it is the outside of a given language, an exterior surface, an eruption of the very limits of a language:

> Les deux aspect s'effectuent suivant une infinite de tonalités, mais toujours ensemble: une limite du langage qui tend toute la langue, une ligne de variation ou de modulation tendue qui porte la langue à cette limite. Et de meme que la nouvelle langue n'est pas extérieure à la langue, la limite asyntaxique n'est pas extérieure au langage: elle est *le dehors* du langage, non pas au-dehors.[30]

In this passage, Deleuze points to the infinite tones that emerge as the result of a friction produced by the limits of a language and the language itself which varies infinitely

[30] Gilles Deleuze, *Critique et clinique* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1993),141.

along the idea of terminal axes. This rich tonality arises as a result of the literary language's potential to be both on the outside and inside of a language at once, as a modulation that forms an exterior surface from the infinite materials within the language. This metaphor of infinite tonality illustrates the model of translation I describe in Chapter Three, where it stands as the complement to the prosodic notion of monotony with which I began my investigation in Chapter One.

Throughout this dissertation, I chart a movement toward a model of literary poetic work that enacts or performs the formal model for a critique it bears within its conceptual framework. This model does not represent the mere conflation of the critical gesture with the creative, nor does it merely entail an expression of the critical voice within the context of a poetic or literary work. As works that are formally strange in terms of genre, the texts I have chosen to examine, from the threshold or paratextual poetics of Chapter Two to the linguistically and culturally hybrid text of Chapter Three, call attention to the cultural and political frameworks of knowledge production and permeate invisibility with the marks of difference. Just as the perfect translation must point to its own incommensurability, the critical translation points to the fact of the translator as an active voice and agent of intervention. This materialization of the translating voice (the outside of the inside: the threshold voice) also brings into relief the difference of the translated text. If the two oppositional terms of translation discourse are established according to an idea of the monolingual (the one and the other), the hybrid text can offer a third term that baffles the paradigm. This third element, like the gutter of the page taking flight, exists with all its beautiful potential, not just between, but also beyond, two finitudes.

Chapter One
Stylized Monotony: The Rhythm of Neutrality

The livelong day he sat in his loom, his ear filled with its monotony, his eyes bent close down on the slow growth of sameness in the brownish web, his muscles moving with such even repetition that their pause seemed almost as much a constraint as the holding of his breath.

— George Eliot, *Silas Marner*

On Monotony

The hum of a ceiling fan, the mechanical grind of an escalator, pilates repetitions, treadmills and exercycles, waiting room *musak* and its tedious refrain: regularly, these imperturbable, monotonous sounds taunt the ear with the sort of relentless persistence that imperils interest. Uninteresting, tedious, continuous, regular, repetitious, unchanging: in common English usage the word *monotonous* is ascribed such undesirable synonyms. Truly predictable, the sameness of monotony is particularly unbearable for it does not stop; its tedium is an expression of its unbending relationship to time, an excessive duration. Monotony never wavers, never falters, never surprises. Monotony cannot seduce; there is no attraction of fleeting adventure or freedom in monotony, which is absolute prolongation without hesitation or variation, purely anticipatable.

Not merely signifying a technical lack of variation or difference, *monotonous* is frequently associated with boredom in popular thought. Yet, at the same time — even as it popularly denotes the sort of assembly-line dullness that would signify the end of art — monotony also now has come to represent the form preferred by anti-aesthetic movements in post-modern poetics and art.[31] This chapter is an attempt to account for various, anomalous

[31] Consider one of conceptual art's practioners, On Kawara, whose work was recently shown in retrospective at the Guggenheim, the repetitive monotony of whose serial endurance performances perfectly exemplifies a "non-aesthetic" monotonous practice. Particularly poignant in this regard is the series of telegraphs repeatedly inscribed over the years with the unchanging phrase, "I am still alive."

and formally generative examples of monotony in artistic production and to trace the emergence of monotony as an unlikely poetic trope in the 20th and 21st century.[32]

In the argument that follows, I initially examine the problem of monotony as a sign of cosmetic uniformity according to cultural theorists of modernist aesthetics such as Theodor Adorno and T. S. Eliot. Their rejection of monotony as that which signifies a lack of vitality in art differs somewhat from John Ruskin's earlier views on the sublime where monotony figures as a necessary and useful counterpart in an aesthetic economy of deferred pleasure, although itself unpleasurable. Undermining a persistent aesthetic opposition between monotony and change, postmodern experimental poet Inger Christensen's book-length cyclical poem *alphabet* suggests that the force of monotony in nature is an aspect of being itself, a force that is vitally opposed to the total destruction of nuclear war. Considering *alphabet* and the apparent resistance of monotony in the face of anthropic devastation leads to a comparative discussion of "The Anatomy of Monotony" by Wallace Stevens, a poem that anticipates even its own end in monotony, its inevitable thanatos and melancholy. Ultimately, I am interested in laying the groundwork for a theory of monotony as a prevalent élan of late twentieth

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[32] Monotony is not a figure in the sense that it does not mean something other than it says. Further, monotony is the saying of one thing, the saying of one thing only, according to a certain pattern or design. On the one hand, monotony is thus an excess of literality; even a repeated trope can risk falling into literality by repetition. Implied in the repetition of this saying one thing that is monotony there arises the possibility for it to mean another thing and therefore to simulate the function of a trope as a result of its overall action. Therefore, the sense of monotony as a trope rests somewhere between the notion of a figure and a motif. It is a motif that by virtue of its repetitious nature becomes a figure of style but a figure that by lack of external reference becomes a motif and points only to itself. (This contextual nature of monotonous signification is exemplified in some contemporary conceptual writing where discourses are displaced from their habitual contexts).

century and early twenty first century art and writing, as a categorical alternative to describe certain works that might otherwise fall under the label 'conceptual' or 'experimental,' depending on medium or genre. This chapter attempts to account for the changing valuation of monotony and repetition from the period when romantic aesthetics flourished to the present time.

Monotony and the Vitality of Art

The problem of monotony as a modern phenomenon is expressed most clearly in the field of music theory because monotony is a form of rhythm. Adorno points — in a passing comment — to monotony as an emergent limit circumscribing all new music in an essay titled "On the Current Relationship between Philosophy and Music." In particular, Adorno addresses a problem arising from the categorization of musical types that occurs alongside a contemporary crisis in classical music. Tuning from radio station to station in search of "some serious music, or as it is known in the sphere of informed barbarism, 'classical music' — the mere fact that it takes place amid the monotony [of pop music] as one category among others means that it in turn appears, even its difference, as simply another facet of that monotony."[33] Adorno's 'monotony' defines a quality of pop music, that is, rhythmically uniform, commodified and therefore contrasted to what he perceives as "serious" music: specifically, classical music performed and heard live in a traditional venue, an experience that, according to a nostalgia

[33] Theodor W. Adorno, *Night Music: Essays on Music 1928-1962*, Edited by Rolf Tiedemann, Translated by Wieland Hoban (London; New York: Seagull Books, 2009), 427.

for modes of listening of the past, is construed as more complex than the experience of listening to a monotonous recording. It is no coincidence that the radio, with its capacity for mass diffusion of musical recordings, figures in this aphoristic view of the sad fate of classical music, as it is a medium that supports a listening experience that is asynchronous with performance. Adorno implies that classical music becomes monotonous as a result of its new context and media of dissemination. Thus, rather than inscribing monotony as an inherent category of a certain type of music, Adorno posits it as a contingent quality affecting all contemporary music. For Adorno, monotony expresses a characteristic category for recorded music in general, of which classical music is simply one type.

Adorno's critique presumes a uniformity of performance among the technological apparatuses that produce recordings and a transparent or neutrally non-intervening medium of dissemination, as though any audio recording represents merely a watered-down version of a live performance. However, in terms offered by media theorist Jonathan Sterne, it becomes clear that the repeatability of a recording is not continuous with the repeatability of a performance — of any sort, whether of classical or pop music in the example above:

> Recording is a form of exteriority: it does not preserve a pre-existing sonic event as it happens so much as it creates and organizes sonic events for the possibility of preservation and repeatability. Recording is, therefore, discontinuous with the 'live' events that it is sometimes said to represent (although there are links of course).[34]

[34] Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past : Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, (Durham, NC : Duke University Press, 2003), 332.

If the recording medium and the radio offer the possibility of repeatability for the first time, it is a repeatability that applies to the recording itself, not the performance, reframing modernism's distinctions between high and low art against a field of emergent technology.

If Adorno offers a view of the recorded medium as that which produces a type of music that is, by the very fact of its recording, monotonous, his view complements another fundamental take on the place of monotony within a given artistic work. For Adorno, both commodified modes of circulation and the emergent rhythmic monotony of pop music exacerbate the production of monotony. Other cultural theorists, including T.S. Eliot and John Ruskin, discuss monotony in terms of an aesthetic economy of predictability and surprise, of agony and pleasure, of tension and inertia.

T.S. Eliot raises the notion of monotony to point to a compositional principle that he insists is opposed to the type of composition that is proper to poetry and which defines the production of poetry. In this view, Eliot argues, regardless of whether one is writing metered verse or free verse (a distinction he finds problematic from the outset), all poetry should by definition avoid monotony: "It is this contrast between fixity and flux, this unperceived evasion of monotony, which is the very life of verse."[35] As with Adorno's opposition between popular and classical music, Eliot presents monotony as the antithesis of poetry, or its very death, to be precise, as a force opposed to "the very life of verse." Notably, the type of poetry in question here, *verse*, has a general analog in classical music, as both the fields of literature and music saw an explosion of new forms and rhythms emerge in the era of industrialization.

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[35] T.S. Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic: Eight Essays on Literature and Education* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), 185.

As such, traditional verse only becomes "traditional" and classifiable as a type of poetry with the emergence of *free verse* — and thereby, as one type of monotony among many, to use Adorno's expression.

Eliot argues that any distinction between verse and free verse is misleading because all verse by its definition thrives on "fixity and flux," on a tension between repetition and difference, whether formally inherited or not. In "Reflections on Vers Libre" (first published in 1917 in *New Statesman* and later collected in *To Criticize the Critic*), Eliot acknowledges that the very unhealthiness or pathological nature of modern society compels the radical breaks with tradition that define the avant-garde. However, just short of condemning the position of the avant-garde, he expresses wariness that a radical, polemical attack on tradition actually fails art as it traps the artist in a reductive set of constraints wherein art can be conceived only as a negation of the tradition of which the artist is suspicious. It is the ironic fate of the avant-garde gesture that the suspect traditions of the present will be supplanted with suspect traditions of the future. You might say, to make a long story short, that this is what happened to *vers libre* in the twentieth century. Far from the freedom cry against the tyranny of meter, which the explicit reference to liberty in its name *vers libre* originally suggested, by the end of the twentieth century, free verse instead came to signify a type of formalism with conventions of its own.

Total monotony, it would seem, has no proper place in the conservation of poetry's vitality. According to the Robert *Dictionnaire Historique de la langue francaise*, '*monotone*' is a late borrowing from the Latin *monotonus*, which signifies "*uniforme, qui se suit sans*

interruption."[36] Therefore the monotonous can be defined as that which does not stop or vary, that which continues uniformly, without any break. Connoted in the descriptive word 'monotonous' is lack of variation, of difference, of interruption, of breakage. Yet traditional and free verse are both premised on the existence of an interruption that is anticipated at the end of the line, a notion of *interruption* that bears affinities to poetry's quality of *suspense* evoked by Mallarmé or *hesitation*, in the words of Valéry.[37] In other words, the reader hangs on the end of the line; the poem turns toward or away from us as the line turns. Caesura, that capture of breath in the middle of the line, also contributes to rhythmic variation; overall, the opposition between of fixity and change is the beating heart of poetry, poetry's vitality.

Traditionally, such tension between fixity and flux was sustained by metrical verse, by prosody and rhyme, but in the case of free-verse poetry, the means of sustaining that tension must be deferred or localized within the line, against its solitariness and its potential ending.[38]

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[36] *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française, s.v.* "monotone."

[37] Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 109.

[38] Marjorie Perloff highlights the continued dominance of the notion of 'the line' in the transition from traditional to free verse poetry in an important essay entitled "After Free Verse: The New Nonlinear Poetries." Perloff's analysis, which includes a definition of free verse comprising a detailed and expansive list of potential characteristics (see note 63), concludes that while a number of common characteristics can be found for a diverse range of 'free verse' poetry, the only criterion that everyone seems agreed upon is that its basic unit of free verse is the line. Thus, from traditional verse to free verse poetry, an emphasis remained on the second of the two terms, 'verse' (*le vers*: the line) instead of the newfound freedom implied by the name of free verse. Marjorie Perloff, "After Free Verse: The

Giorgio Agamben addresses the topic of enjambment in a short talk entitled "The End of the Poem," presenting an argument that bears some affinities to Eliot's definition of poetry, if only in the preliminary claims presented:

> I will have to begin with a claim that, without being trivial, strikes me as obvious — namely, that poetry *lives* only in the tension and difference (and hence also in the virtual interference) between sound and sense, between the semiotic sphere and the semantic sphere.[39] [*Dovrò, per questo, esordire da una tesi che, senza essere triviale, mi pare tuttavia evidente, e, cioè, che la poesía non vive che nella tensione e lo scarto (e, quindi, anche nell'interferenza virtuale) fra il suono e il senso, fra la serie semiótica e quella semántica.*][40]

Rather than define poetry against all the other arts, Agamben begins by distinguishing it from prose according to the function of the poetic line: by extension, enjambment is the characteristic by which poetry obviously distinguishes itself from prose, and thus by its very potential to oppose a syntactical limit to a metrical limit. Prose, by definition, cannot do this, does not embody this potentiality or this tension. Then, in an attempt to examine the pathos inherent in the last lines of verse, Agamben offers the hypothesis that a poem ends, or dies, in its very last lines, when any tension (for example, between fixity and flux) is literally flattened, when there are no more potential limits to oppose as phantasms but only final, total limits, wherein all tension terminates. For what is poetic suspense or hesitation if not a

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New NonLinear Poetries," In *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word,* Edited by Charles Bernstein (Oxford University Press, 1998).

[39] Agamben, *Stanzas*, 109, emphasis mine.

[40] Giorigio Agamben, *Categorie Italiane : Studi di poetica* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1996), 113.

heightened illusion of potentiality? The texture of the poem goes flat at the point where rhyme ceases to perpetuate rhythm, which then devolves into monotony.

There is a notable similarity in these two formulations, by Agamben and Eliot, in their use of specifically figurative critical language that extends a life-like quality to poetry, particularly in terms of personification. Eliot writes of poetry's 'life' and Agamben states that poetry 'lives' (*vive*). More specifically, to reiterate the phrases in question: "poetry *lives* only in the tension and difference" (Agamben via translator Heller-Roazen) and "this contrast between fixity and flux … is the very *life* of verse" (Eliot). In both statements, poetry figuratively comes alive; it is vivacious; yet this prototype of living language must also therefore face the capacity to die, to be injured, to be proud, like any sort of feeling being. Contrasted to such living poetry is reviled monotony, which poetry apparently evades just as living beings seek to avoid death. Monotony would appear to present a threat to poetry's vitality. Following Eliot's line of thinking, the unperceived evasion of monotony *is* the rhythm of poetry, whether characterized as free verse, metered verse, Olson's projective verse, Hopkins' "sprung" rhythm or any poetry of modernism.

Stylized Monotony in Inger Christensen's *alphabet*

I write like wind
that writes with clouds'
tranquil script

or quickly across the sky
in vanishing strokes
as if with swallows

I write like wind
that writes in water
with stylised monotony

— Inger Christensen, *alphabet*

If monotony once represented the very thing that music and verse must by definition avoid according to early 20th century critics, it was to emerge and dominate art as a quality that was prevalent and promoted rather than opposed in the later part of the twentieth century, with the emergence of conceptual art.

Inger Christensen, in her pioneering work in experimental poetics, binds the voice of the lyrical *I* with writing that is a form "stylized monotony," "like wind that writes in water."[41] In *alphabet*, originally published in 1981, monotony figures thematically in the reassuring rhythm of natural phenomena, as an aspect of nature's repetitive certainty. Stylistically, *alphabet* does not demonstrate the deployment of a monotonous poetics (the language of repetition in Christensen's work is based on the figure of the simile and the process of figuration rather than monotony); however, the notion of monotony is represented in the text, suggesting a hypothesis about the place of monotony in poetics.

Rhythm may be properly human, but monotony, as one variation of rhythm, does not in fact point by opposition to the realm of death; rather, monotony as an aesthetic value might point toward various forms of non-human living expression. Inger Christensen's work *alphabet* troubles the simple opposition between repetition as death on the one hand and

[41] Inger Christensen, *alphabet*, trans. Susanna Nied (New York: New Directions, 1981), 59.

difference as life on the other, as dictated by received categories. In this view, it is nature that repeats, whereas the mind, by virtue of its memory, invents; along these lines, monotony would describe the life-rhythm of flora and fauna, of non-human nature, by extension, of any seemingly natural life of repetitious action and therefore monotonous in rhythm of life. However, constituting a vital turn in this narrative of monotony and concomitant ontological hierarchies, undermining an inherent dualism that sets apart nature and humanity, the poetry of Inger Christensen challenges us to reconsider the empty associations we hold for monotony as her text deconstructs this very opposition.

How monotony figures within the aesthetic is a matter of style, and more particularly of stylistic economy. "Style," Deleuze writes, "is the economy of language."[42] With regards to monotonous rhythm and style, such an economy is not restricted to the release of unpleasurable tension to achieve pleasure, as Freud suggests in his theory of the pleasure principle; indeed, in poetic theory it would seem that the tension of opposition is itself the source of pleasure and vitality despite the paradoxical drive toward death thereby implied. Christensen's *alphabet*, commences on the threshold of existence, with an emphasis on being, and only after destruction is introduced does the possibility of metaphorical correlation

[42] Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 113. ("*Le style est l'économie de la langue.*" Deleuze, *Critique et clinique*, 142). In similar terms, but with the aim of arguing for the existence of a singular, unique language usage that emerges within each literary work, Deleuze discusses the tense limits of a language as a frictious, productive force, a description that resonates with Agamben's claims for poetic rhythm (opposing a semantic and syntactic limit) cited above. "Les deux aspects n'en sont pas moins corrélatifs : le tenseur et la limite, la tension dans la langue et la limite du langage. Les deux aspects s'effectuent suivant une infinité de tonalités, mais toujours ensemble : une limite du langage qui tend toute la langue, une ligne de variation ou de modulation tendue qui porte la langue à cette limite." *Ibid.*,141.

between things emerge stylistically. In *alphabet* and with the alphabet, Christensen asks us to examine whether being is sufficient before the law according to an economy that is aimed, ultimately, at its own destruction.

In *alphabet,* a serial long poem structured according to a mathematical formula, Christensen's critical immersion in the non-human life-world proposes a redemptive potentiality of nature's monotonous 'thought' as ontological thought, especially when considered in relation to devastation and worldly destruction in the twentieth century. This immersion does not constitute a romantic retreat from the social world, but rather a radical rethinking of its mechanisms, even as all formal capacities (whether for nuclear physics or poetry) spiral out of control. Monotony emerges as a possible response to the threat of utter destruction by nuclear weapons, of unfathomable nothingness, against which *alphabet* is an affirmation of existence. Christensen's stylized monotony belongs to water, air, the elements and seasons, including "spring that writes / the common alphabet / of anemones beeches / violets wood sorrel," but these "natural" elements are allied with the vitality of thought in her work, not relegated to non-rational or mystical status, as the alphabet's writing in nature would suggest.[43] The conventional trope, the poetic simile, is rendered astonishing in the context of this austerely and numerically constructed poetic work. The self-referential aspect of writing itself as a figure of comparison ("I write […] with stylized monotony") conveys a lyric code at the threshold of potentially monotonous repetition.[44]

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[43] Christensen, *alphabet*, 60.

First published in 1981, *alphabet* is unique, in part because its formal structure is based on mathematical and alphabetic sequences — on number and letter — instead of a poetic verse form as a conventional set of measures and lines. Thus, while being highly structured or formalized, its form is unfamiliar, systematic, numerical, new to poetry, and seemingly neutral. For this reason, *alphabet* constitutes an example of Danish "systemic literature," meaning "*alphabet* is not merely a collection of poems but a work that integrates each text into a whole, generated by a specific and unique system."[45] Two systems in particular are deployed in this poem: the Fibonacci sequence and the alphabet.

The Fibonacci sequence is a mathematical expression that represents an application of the geometric principle known as the Golden Mean, the Golden Section or the Golden Ratio. The clearest and earliest definition of what was to later be called the Golden Mean comes from Euclid (who refers to it as the "extreme and mean ratio"): "A right line is said to be cut at a point in extreme and mean ratio when the whole line is to the greater segment as the greater segment is to the less."[46] The "mean" ratio came to represent a desirable, ideal proportion in

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[44] The lyrical *I* of poetry, which has no correlate in other genres, constitutes what is perhaps the ultimate and most enduring poetic experiment, due to the ambiguous nature of its participation in a mode of representation, as discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

[45] Lis Wedell Pape, "Oscillations – On Subject and Gender in Late Modernism." *Orbis Litterarum* 53 (1998): 259-60.

[46] Euclid, *The First Six Books of the Elements of Euclid and Propositions I.-XXI. Of Book XI., and an Appendix on the Cylinder, Sphere, Cone, Etc. with Copious Annotations and Numerous Exercises,* trans. John Casey (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co., London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1885), 135.

aesthetics. While perhaps obscure to most contemporary contexts, its structures can nonetheless be found in the works from the history of music, art, architecture and literature as a proportion that has been associated with beauty since the classical period. In terms of literary history, the Golden Ratio was used by Virgil, as shown in elaborate, painstakingly precise exegesis of Virgil's *Aenid* by George Duckworth, who claims that such mathematical patterning was a common compositional trend among Roman poets of the period, including Catallus, Horace and Lucretius, in whose work he also finds examples of the Golden Ratio. During the Renaissance, the Golden Ratio influenced the work of artists such as Durer and Leonardo da Vinci, and its impact did not stop there but continued to intrigue modernist artists and architects across time, especially the cubists.[47] While the first expression of the concept of the mean ratio dates back to the writings of Euclid of Alexandria around 300 BC, the discovery of the Fibonacci sequence is attributed to a 13th century Italian mathematician, Leonardo Fibonacci of Pisa.[48]

Translator Susanna Nied explains the role of the Fibonacci sequence in the construction of Christensen's *alphabet* as follows: "the length of each section of Inger Christensen's *alphabet* is based on Fibonacci's sequence, a mathematical sequence beginning 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21… in which each number is the sum of the two previous numbers."

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[47] Mario Livio, *The Golden Ratio: The Story of Phi, the World's Most Astonishing Number* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002),169.

[48] "The sequence 1, 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144, 233, …, in which each term (starting with the third) is equal to the sum of the two preceding terms, was appropriately dubbed the Fibonacci sequence in the nineteenth century by the French mathematician Edouard Lucas." (Livio, 97)

More specifically, in *alphabet*, numerical terms in the Fibonacci sequence determine the number of lines in each poem, depending on the poem's place in the sequence so that the number of poetic lines accretes additively. In combination with this mathematical structuring device, the alphabet constitutes a second system. Sequentially iterated letters of the alphabet appear in lieu of titles for each poem in the series. In addition, these letters determine the primary vowel sound of the words in each poem. For example, the first poem in *alphabet* (which is one line in length) lists nouns beginning with a, the second b, the third c… and so forth. The first poems in *alphabet* commences a list bound thematically by a central ontological concern as nouns referring to elemental phenomena are connected syntactically by the repetition of a single verb, "exist." The first poem in *alphabet* is simply: "apricot trees exist; apricot trees exist" and the second, "bracken exists; and blackberries, blackberries; / bromine exists; and hydrogen, hydrogen." The letters of the alphabet offer a means of "innocent ordering — 'adamic' & 'prelasperian' as Roland Barthes suggests."[49] However, thematic elements of ruination appear throughout Christensen's list of innocently ordered phenomena.

In fact, an element of destruction already surfaces thematically in the second (b) poem of the sequence: "hydrogen" will resurface in a later poem in the form of the "hydrogen bomb." In the excerpt below, an additive and expansionist poetic form is marked by the mathematical precision structuring the length of stanzaic units, which sequentially grow

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[49] Joris and Rothenberg, Eds*, Poems for the Millennium*, Volume 2, 535. Also see Barthes' reflections on fragmentation and alphabetical order in *Roland Barthes Par Roland Barthes*, where he writes: "L'ordre alphabétique efface tout, refoule toute origine. [The alphabetical order erases everything, banishes every origin.]" (178).

longer. Each contains a number of lines equivalent to a prime number, starting with 1 and increasing incrementally. Both in terms of form and theme, Christensen shows how an accumulative web of connection ironically (and pathetically) returns us to the beginning, an originary point of both departure and destruction, a cycle of devastation. The following translation is by Pierre Joris:

atom bombs exist

Hiroshima, Nagasaki

Hiroshima 6
august 1945

Nagasaki 9
august 1945

140, 000 dead and
wounded in Hiroshima

about 60, 000 dead and
wounded in Nagasaki

frozen numbers
somewhere in a distant
and ordinary summer

since then the wounded
have died, many at first, indeed
most, then fewer, but in the end

all; in the end
the children of the wounded,
stillborn, dying,

many, continuously,
some, finally the
last ones; in my kitchen

I stand and peel
potatoes; the faucet
runs and nearly
covers the noise of the
children in the yard;

the children yell and
nearly cover the noise
of the birds
in the trees; the birds
sing and nearly

cover the murmur
of the leaves in the wind;
the leaves murmur
and nearly cover
the silence of the sky,

the sky which is light
and the light which since
then has nearly
resembled the fire

of the atom bomb[50]

From the image of peeling potatoes at the kitchen sink, a spiral of separating surfaces emblematizes the poem's movement. This is a movement toward exteriority through concentric scenes and sounds of dailyness, such as are only observed in the quiet of isolation. Each of these scenes, with its relative sound and image, is supplemented by the next, in a movement that spirals away from the specific subject to its lyrical immersion in a vast expanse of sky and all light. If monotony and repetition represent definitive qualities of the quotidian, Christensen's poem divulges a lyrical indifference to the question of whether experience evolves as an exteriority or a domestic privacy, whether or not the public voice will endure. The spiral offers a movement toward exteriority that emerges with the material of the interior code that composes it, an additive movement rather than one of exclusion or negation, one that carries forward patterns from the material it has named.

In one of the few English-language articles on *alphabet*, Lis Wedell Pape argues that in terms of theme, *alphabet* is an apocalyptic poem because the simple phenomena named immediately contain elements of their own destruction such that "the unfolding of the theme repeats the uncontrollable growth of the system."[51] If there may be a process of disclosure enacted through additive nominalization patterns in the text, it is an accumulation that is not yet subsumed in an apocalyptic terminal point, an accumulation that foresees neither the end of the world nor the end of time. *alphabet*'s spiral is additive in a highly calculated

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[50] Trans. Pierre Joris, *Poems for Millennium,* Volume 2, 533-4.

[51] Lis Wedell Pape, "Oscillations…," 260.

exponential pattern based on a complex possibility of return. Formulaic, if the text is not entirely uncontrolled, it is, at the very least, substantively overwhelming, exceeding conventional bounds of representation even as it inscribes the existence of "given limits."[52] While the possible scope of destruction is immense, the beginnings of knowledge are disclosed as the state of their own continuous present, just as the lyrical emergence of a subject is an event of its own writing, its perpetually renewed enunciation. The subject that endures in time, the public voice that is an end in itself and a vested authority, constructs the end of time as its antithesis, and works against it. While Pape argues that the notion of a terminal (and historically masculine) subject of enunciation is deconstructed processually in Christensen's *alphabet*, it is also important to reconsider the implications of worldly terminality implied by an apocalyptic reading in terms of the subject, who is not against or indifferent to the world. In other words, there is no neutral isolation of the subject in the face of an apocalypse.

Formally, Christensen's poem becomes unwieldy as it grows too long and complex for the scope of its containment. The sequence ends on the letter "n," only halfway through the alphabet. Does this n-point represent the poem's nuclear half-life? Is the process of radioactive decay underway, revealing a potential for timely self-destruction embedded in the beginnings of signification as always already unfolding? Is the alphabet — substance of writing, of written language — a metaphor for chemistry and the substance of matter?

In *alphabet*, as the series proceeds, the poems grow increasingly complex in their syntax, accommodating the introduction of diverse verbs in addition to 'exist' and thinking

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[52] Christensen, *alphabet*, 17. "given limits exist, street, oblivion…"

grammatical subjects in addition to the simple phenomena listed in the first poems. Turning away from the apparent neutrality of first few poems, partway through the *alphabet* series, the atom bomb and devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki drop shockingly into the poem's landscape. As noted previously, the element "hydrogen" is reiterated as the poetic form spirals outward, building in the process on material that already exists, substance provided by the world ironically as the element of its own nuclear and compositional accretion and decay. In this way, Christensen's *alphabet* formally deploys a unique system of minimalist poetic variation and repetition to grapple with the phenomenon of nuclear destruction, the destructive elements of which originate in the very natural world that the human economy ironically seeks to destroy. Here, we witness the subject confront ordinary and extraordinary fears of death and annihilation. These challenges range from ontological reflections on the beginning and end of existence to sociopolitical horror at the depravity of a nuclear arms race where the unspeakable goal is to build something ensuring the "harm is as great is it can be."[53]

This scale of damage, unfathomable in scope, unfolds from microscopic potential, from such condensed beginnings. Passing through the industrial world, each named phenomenon sheds the joy of the world that first spoke it — the very world it composes. However, inception is deceptive; each name bears its own harm in the poem that is the seed of its variation. Christensen's "stylized monotony" is the groove or furrow in which the *vers* or the line is drawn with seeming indifference, a form of objective repetition as ephemeral and unforgiving as weather. Yet the cracks in indifference of such experimental poetic industry

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[53] *Ibid*, 40. "cobalt bombs exist / wrapped in their cloaks / of cobalt-60 isotopes / whose half-life / ensures the most / harmful effects / there's no more to / say; we ensure that / the harm is as great / as it can be…"

also represent a generative and productive form of monotony, transforming along crystalline forms as names are recycled and associated with socio-historical contexts – those that early on in the sequence are iterated a-historically as though springing from asocial neutrality in *reverse*. The rhythm of monotony masquerades as a neutral surface to resist subsuming forms of capitalism and nationalism, just as it ironically resonates with superficial forms of twentieth century communications that exceed the borders of nations.

Finally, I would like to draw attention to the progression of imagery in the poem excerpted above in terms of a gradual distancing from the sounds of human language and the rhythms of human speech and dialogue to the sounds of the faucet, yelling of children, songs of birds and the wind and, at the emergence from the spiral, finally, the silence evoked by the sky after the emergence of the atomic bomb. Christensen's sky holds the traces of atrocity and memorializes the possibility of nuclear annihilation: "the sky which is light / and the light which since / then has nearly / resembled the fire / of the atom bomb." Instead of metaphorically pointing to the possibility of eternity, this sky bodes of disaster in a way that would have been unimaginable before the invention of nuclear arms.

Monotony as Thanatos in Wallace Stevens' "Anatomy of Monotony"

In contrast to the post-nuclear sky that figures in Christensen's poem, there is the sky that figures in American modernist poet Wallace Stevens' "Anatomy of Monotony." Written before Hiroshima but during the interbellum years, here, the sky functions metaphorically as a figure for death and individual fatalism according to a depiction of human life as a phenomenon that is determined purely by biological mechanisms and aimed only at death. In

this poem, the body, that vulnerable frame of human life, is thematically associated with nature's monotony and dissociated from the mind. "Anatomy of Monotony" was added to the second printing (revised text) of Steven's collection *Harmonium* when it was reprinted in 1931. (Stevens added several poems between the first (1923) printing of *Harmonium* and the second)[54]:

I.

If from the earth we came, it was an earth
That bore us as a part of all the things
It breeds and that was lewder than it is.
Our nature is her nature. Hence it comes
Since by our nature we grow old, earth grows
The same. We parallel the mother's death.
She walks an autumn ampler than the wind
Cries up for us and colder that the frost
Pricks in our spirits at the summer's end,
And over the bare spaces of our skies
She sees a barer sky that does not bend.

II.

The body walks forth naked in the sun
And, out of tenderness or grief, the sun
Gives comfort, so that other bodies come,
Twinning our phantasy and our device,

[54] "Anatomy of Monotony" appears in the middle of a group of fourteen poems that were added after the first edition. These fourteen poems were inserted between "Nomad Exquisite" and the penultimate poem of *Harmonium*, "Tea."

And apt in versatile motion, touch and sound
To make the body covetous in desire
Of the still finer, more implacable chords.
So be it. Yet the spaciousness and light
In which the body walks and is deceived,
Falls from that fatal and that barer sky,
And this the spirit sees and is aggrieved.

Between the first and second stanza, the poem's figurative turn is marked by the insertion of the word "fatal" in the description of the bare sky at the end of the second part, as compared to the last two lines of the first, where it is simply bare and foreboding of something barer. The fatalism of Stevens' poem is absorbed and deflected by the figure of the bare sky (note that the adjective "bare" is repeated three times, as are the key concepts in the poem, "nature" and the "body") — a monotonous absorption that, by definition, does not alter the lyrical subject. Mirroring bleak, bare, unbending skies, the fatalistic lot of human life is paralleled to the fate of the greater Earth. Nature, thus personified, and the human body share the same course toward death. Over life, the sun's "versatile motion, touch and sound" stimulate the senses to distract the body from an unchanging and bleak end, to incite fantasy and desire. "Spaciousness and light" fall from the sky, which is aloof, indifferent, Other. The deceptive stimulation of "touch and sound" results only in the monotonous repetition of life, which takes the form of even more lives, conveying bodies forward indifferently through birth to death, where life finds its final end.

Formally, Steven's poem rhymes only in the ultimate lines, at the end of each stanza. Further, these rhymes are separated by an unrhymed line, which has the effect of emphasizing

the final rhyme, underscoring its inherent, unyielding fatalism, affecting the reader who is also aggrieved. As such, the rhyme scheme aptly seals the fatalistic promise offered by the scene represented in the poem. In "The End of the Poem," Agamben argues that the final rhyme in a poem represents an impasse, where the tension between sound and sense slackens because the poem is given prerogative to surface and to congeal semantically in a manner contradictory to poetic movement, causing a backwards doubling and interruption of all poetic hesitation that has gone before as language turns to prose. Stevens' use of end rhyme as the only rhyme in the poem emphasizes the incomprehensibility of the event of fatalism as a total end that cannot be grasped by sense, but remains unwritten, untouched, an unbending unchanging sky. The deception of the sky, which offers the warmth of fantasy to mask its ultimate promise of ungiving unbending nothingness, is represented in a way unimagined by the author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, whose 17th-century treatise on the dark humour is surely alluded to in Stevens' title. Is monotony a contemporary term for melancholy? Is boredom synonymous with monotony? What is the relationship between monotony and boredom or between melancholy and monotony, and negative affect in general (where "negative" implies a literal absence of something)? How might Steven's flat, unvarying sky screen us from death? The sky – traditional figure for the heavens, for constellations, eternity?

Stevens' anatomy of nature and the figure of the sky's deception is first of all a description of alienation through which the living subject is deflected by the nature of his or her willed participation in the deception of joy. The deception of joy might be the non-understanding that is the pleasure of reading poetry, when enjoyment is permitted as a form of understanding that allows rhythmic sense to complement semantic sense, for example. It is a willed and willing deception that knows through enjoyment rather than communication, and

cannot therefore be represented. The end of the poem is a *mise-en-abyme* for the end of the life of verse, whether that is understood to be a paroxysmal or anticlimactic repetition of thanatos. Nature itself cannot will the lyrical subject to participate in its monotonous repetition, which breaks the floodgates to a grief that cannot be closed through mourning, even as the lyrical poem seeks closure as a form of absorption. Nature cannot will the lyrical subject's abnegation, but rather the mind of nature is repeated as an unwilled rejection. As Deleuze explains:

> ce pourquoi l'on dit que la Nature est concept aliéné ; esprit aliéné, opposé à soi-même. A de tels concepts, répondent des objets qui sont eux-mêmes dénués de mémoire, c'est-à-dire qui ne possèdent et ne recueillent pas en soi leurs propres moments. On demande pourquoi la Nature répète : parce qu'elle est *partes extra partes, mens momentanea*. La nouveauté alors passe du côté de l'esprit que se représente . . .[55]
>
> [that is why it is said that Nature is an alienated mind or alienated concept, opposed to itself. Corresponding to such concepts are those objects which themselves lack memory — that is, which neither possess nor collect in themselves their own moments. The question is asked why Nature repeats: because it is *partes extra partes, mens momentanea*. Novelty then passes to the mind which represents itself…][56]

In Stevens' poem, the novelty of the mind is aggrieved by the representation of itself as yet another form of monotonous absorption.

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[55] Deleuze, *Différence et Répétition*, 24.

[56] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 14.

Novelty, therefore, belonging to the mind, emerges and breaks off from monotony, which is mere repetition without memory, the capacity for invention or critical distance. This is how Stevens' speaker is presented, and why life's repetitive meaninglessness summons the speaker's grief, drawing the poem to a close. Christensen, on the other hand, writing in the post-war period, knows a different world: one in which annihilation is possible, a world in which all traces of human memory may be obliterated by human invention. As noted, Stevens composed "Anatomy of Monotony" during the interbellum years, before the epistemological break caused by the scientific discoveries that led to nuclear destruction, which announced itself with the tragedy of Hiroshima. Stevens' depiction of the sky in "Anatomy of Monotony" was made before such a rupture was even fathomable, while Christensen's post-nuclear lament conceives of human memory and achievement under a radically different sky, where meaninglessness is a possibility that looms *beyond* (not *in*) theoretical uniformity, beyond the invariable hum of monotony.

Within these two skies, which differ radically, the figure of the sun supplies a further point of comparison, yet in neither case is the sun a neutral figure. In both poems, the sun corresponds to a truth/deception dichotomy, concepts have been alternately associated with nature or science in different epochs. In "Anatomy of Monotony," the sun is deceptively warming. It promotes Eros and stimulates life with its "versatile motion, touch and sound," but this versatility is rendered suspect by the singular bareness of the uninhabited sky. In contrast to the sun, Stevens' bare sky with its repetitive, monotonous promise of nothingness figuratively represents the cynical fate of modernity, wherein the "goal of all life is death," for

every biological organism is driven by Thanatos "to return to the inanimate state."[57] The formally non-teleological structure of Stevens' poem, which culminates in peculiar end-rhymes, carries out this intention via this non-lexical but importantly meaningful formal attribute. The poem's investment in biological science is further represented in its title: the poem announces itself as a reflection on "anatomy," and by allusion, as a symptomology of depression such as Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. However, the post-war historical context of the poem's composition and recall the conditions that compelled Freud to write *Beyond the Pleasure Principle.* After the war, and grappling with the trauma induced by the war, Freud introduced the notion of the death drive, controversially, as a negative compulsion based on the biological inevitability of death, suggesting that such a compulsion was inescapable, irresistible and necessary. This biological explanation for wilful behaviour (which was problematic and would be revised later) originated at key historical moment, during the interbellum years, historically close in time to when Steven's poem was written. "Anatomy of Monotony," Stevens's title, points to a conceit that is directed overall at the discovery and exposure of biological and universal truisms through the figure of the body and its monotonous reproduction.

In Christensen's poem, the sun is not named and is therefore less explicitly present than in Stevens' poem; instead, it is implied metonymically by the words "sky" and "light." The sun's light depends on hydrogen "at the star's core," the first element of the periodic

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[57] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* ed. James Strachey, vol. 18, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953), 38.

table, because the sun itself is a natural product of the combustion of the hydrogen molecule, a process that has its technological analog in the hydrogen bomb, to which the sun is compared metaphorically: "the light which has since then resembled the light of the hydrogen bomb."[58] In Christensen's poem, the sun thus irreparably figures as a harbinger of devastation. Although it might hide every self-contained potential for destruction in its apparently natural neutrality and innocence, its light now forever bears a terrible association with the unspeakable blaze of nuclear destruction. The sun comes to function as a continual admonition in the speaker's vision of the natural world, a persistent reminder not of Eros and life but of the danger of war and annihilation.[59]

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[58] Christensen, *alphabet*, 47, 25.

[59] While an article published by the American Ornithologists' Union on "The Monotony Threshold in Singing Birds" by C. Hartshorne may not seem to offer any resonant insight into the conditions of contemporary art and poetry, it does immediately raise the question of cognition as it relates to memory, which serves in an analysis of the phenomenon of monotony. For one, the author stresses that "continuous" monotony is "intolerable," where continuous monotony is more specifically defined as "many repetitions unrelieved by substantial pauses." The notion of memory is at the center of this discussion because, according to the naturalist's view, the effectiveness of stimuli depends on the experience of memory after a period of discontinuity or change. The notion of stimulus as a vector of change and versatility implies that the contrary is also a given: that any ongoing, unbreaking and unvarying repetition is "deadening." This perspective, which draws a spectrum for monotony that claims death at its most extreme manifestation and implicitly aligns change with vitality, has been more or less maintained in the natural sciences and art as an ironically continuous and unchanging idea that extends across modernisms. It is one threshold that cannot be crossed (literally, the threshold of the mono, the one).

The Neutral Sun

...change being most delightful after some prolongation of monotony, as light appears most brilliant after the eyes have been for some time closed.

— Ruskin

The poetic deployment of such unsettling inversions as these, where the figuratively neutral or nourishing light of the sun is shown to promise deception on the one hand or devastation on the other, is based on a principle that also underlies a common device in surrealist works of the period. By depicting the impossible or disparate in such a way as to create unsettling harmony, one of surrealism's tenets was to bring together shockingly incompatible images in order to reveal "previously neglected associations."[60] Consider, for example, how the sky functions in *Empire des Lumières*, a group of paintings produced in 1954 by René Magritte, one of which is included here. In this image, the sky is pale blue, bright as though illuminated by full daylight, while the earth is dark, shadowed, as though by night, illuminated only dimly by streetlights and soft electric fixtures glowing in the windows of townhouses lining the street: the monotony of ever-present light, of electricity. Does this image depict a simple quotidian phenomenon: that fleeting instant of dawn, the blue hour, when the sky holds the potential for light, before it illuminates the ground? Or is there something more sinister at work in these inversions and juxtapositions of night and day, darkness and light? What knowledge does the sky bear that is unknowable on earth? Is civilization impervious to the illumination of daylight

[60] André Breton, "From *Manifesto of Surrealism 1924*." *Poems for the Millennium, vol. 1*. Trans. Richard M. Seaver and Helen R. Lane, 468.

or merely powerless in comparison to this vast natural source? Or has civilization turned its back on its natural resources? The quiet incongruity of Magritte's image is unsettling, strained as it is between what is revealed and what is concealed where the unknowable pulses with the tension of poetic metaphor.

Fig. 2. René Magritte, *The Empire of Light II*, 1950. Oil on Canvas, 31 x 39" (78.8 x 99.1 cm). Museum of Modern Art.

(Some notes on the sky)

Sky's light: an expanse that can hold an infinite number of contradictions. Denuded of clouds, the sky boasts no outcomes and does not reveal itself any further than it is. It is no more than it is, cerulean, expressionless, exquisite. It is no more than it is, constant, close, blind. The sky is its existence; it begins to exist as a beginning without fixity, with nothing more to its depths,

which are infinite, than this measure of its own existence. It is an adamant "je ne sais quoi" that cannot be translated. An untranslatable phrase that writes itself into the cliché of common usage to evoke a shared idea of the unutterable or sacred. Its customs have no beginning, while its rituals are unfixed in a bygone style. Its existence is ceremonial and giddy with oxygen, resplendent with nuance and seamlessly nude.

These contradictions of nudity and nuance in the seemingly smooth surface, contradictions of coldness and warmth, of meaning and pleasure, of vivacity in death and death in life and the attraction of the sky as a muscle that does not hesitate, a tenacity that does not give, a collection of amorphous desires, fears, phantasms or daydreams. Burning up in the sky with a monotonous indifference that cannot attend to the presence of the other or love.

The sky arrives at the end of poem as an end not to the poem per se but even more fatally as an end to ending's rivalry, as the death of meaning's rivalry. The poem does not end but in such a flatly perceived expanse of depthless eternity. This illusion of flatness contradicts itself as a form of closure that gapes and slackens. Monotony is such an illusion of flatness. Omnipresent, impermeable, the monotonous sky is where the poem has led us since its established beginnings.

Monotony and the Sublime

Monotony is characterized adversely as an anti-aesthetic principle in Eliot's negative definition of poetry cited above (i.e., that poetry by definition avoids monotony). In this passage and definition, monotony is framed as a failure of the tension between "fixity and flux" that is the heart of poetry and the driving force of poetic rhythm. Monotony is the failure that poetry must avoid in order to stay alive as such, and announces itself as a slackening of

aesthetic rhythm, a diminishment tantamount to a slackening of vitality and life force and therefore a rhythmic failure that amounts to the death of poetry, the collapse of which is caused by monotonous cessation. In these terms, monotony is not a force or drive in and of itself but rather a description of absence, of the lack of such a force as that which drives life and diversity. It is both the negation of the life force and its failure according to Eliot's formulation.

Similarly, Adorno characterizes monotony in terms of depreciation, as a lack of quality or depth that he finds to be characteristic of contemporary pop music and even of all recorded music in general. While both Eliot and Adorno thereby write off monotony as an undesirable characteristic of poetry or music, both also inadvertently acknowledge the increasing force, presence and pressure of monotony in the modern world. Indeed, while these early twentieth century writers understood monotony as a force to be avoided, repressed, constrained, even eliminated, the romantics before them conceived of monotony as useful to the economy of pleasure, although not pleasurable in and of itself.

For the romantics who witnessed the birth of industrialization, monotony figured in an economy of sublime natural beauty and aesthetic pleasure, but this view was incompatible with and superseded by the phenomenon of miserable human monotony in emerging forms of industrial labour. Across this landscape of shifting values, monotony figured as an integral part of the economy, which involved exchanging values of repetition and change, first as a lull necessary for deferred aesthetic pleasure, but then as a force to be reckoned with, one that posed a threat to human invention, thought and art in general. This changing economy is clearly rendered visible in John Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice*, specifically in a chapter on the "Nature of the Gothic." Here, the concepts of "monotony" and "changefulness" are expressed

as two poles of Ruskin's definition of aesthetic pleasure, where the pain of the monotonous experience enhances the future pleasure of the experience of change.

The concept of changefulness is first introduced in Ruskin's attempt to define Gothic architecture when Ruskin names six "characteristic or moral elements" ranging in importance from savageness to redundance, with "changefulness" (or "love of change") occupying the position of second-most importance. Then, through his attempt to define Gothic architecture, Ruskin explores the concepts of changefulness and monotony at length (a discussion that is excised from the text in many later, abridged versions of *The Stones of Venice*, but which was printed at length in the three volume edition of 1851-3). Ruskin's notion of changefulness, explored as a quintessential aspect of Gothic architecture, leads to his consideration of the absence of changefulness, which he calls monotony. In the process, Ruskin defines different types of monotony, and describes the various instrumental ways in which monotony is broken in nature and art.[61]

To begin, Ruskin's definition of Gothic architecture stems primarily from a dichotomy he identifies in the structures of labour relations that inform architectural construction. Specifically, he identifies three types of ornamentation styles in architecture that are based on the relationship of the builders to their work. Thus, these three styles, the "servile," the "constitutional" and the "revolutionary," are defined according to the relative degree of agency in each case of the "inferior" workman who executes the architect's designs, with the

[61] John Ruskin, "The Sea-Stories," volume 2 of *The Stones of Venice* (London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1853).

revolutionary style showing the greatest freedom of the workman and the servile the least.[62] Ruskin remarks on the greater individuality (and thus decreased regularity) demonstrated in medieval architecture as compared to classical Greek or the British architecture of his period, for example. By contrast, he distinguishes Gothic architecture by its propensity for "perpetual change" in variations invented by medieval builders and the generative potential of each break with tradition seen in Gothic architecture.[63] Ruskin suggests that the scope and number of these variations attests to the freedom of the worker in that era.

Just as Ruskin associates "perpetual change" with freedom, he criticizes his contemporaries' views on architecture, which esteem order, regularity and functionality over variation and novelty. He argues for a greater understanding of architecture as an art form, which he believes should be appreciated like literature for its complexity and capacity for innovation, a view that would allow for and valorize variation as opposed to absolute regularity, which Ruskin associates with monotony:

> Let us then understand at once, that change and variety is as much a necessity to the human heart and brain in buildings as in books; that there is no merit, though there is some occasional use in monotony; and that we must no more expect to derive either pleasure or profit from an architecture whose ornaments are of one pattern and whose pillars are of one proportion, then we should out of a universe in which the clouds were all of one shape, and the trees all of one size.[64]

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[62] *Ibid*., 158.

[63] *Ibid.*, 172.

Through his exploration of monotony, Ruskin's masochism expresses itself keenly. Here monotony figures as a state of withheld pleasure, which makes the enjoyment of future variation all the greater by its deferment. This is the principal "occasional use" of monotony that Ruskin refers to in the above selection, and later more explicitly. When exposed to monotony in nature and music, the hearer or observer must "endure with patience" the "recurrence of the great masses of sound or form, and to seek for entertainment in a careful watchfulness of the minor details" or "bear patiently the infliction of the monotony for some moments, in order to feel the full refreshment of the change." Ruskin claims that the pain endured becomes the "price paid for future pleasure" in a rhythmic economy of monotony and change.[65]

Ruskin locates parallels to the aesthetic economy of monotony and change in nature. In nature as in art, monotony and change are inseparable, alternating elements, "change being most delightful after some prolongation of monotony, as light appears most brilliant after the eyes have been for some time closed."[66] Here, in Ruskin's argument, darkness comes to occupy a position metaphorically comparable to monotony as the absence of light and variation, as an unbending, singular visual rhythm. However, Ruskin then admits to the sublimity of darkness, which elevates darkness, and thereby monotony, from a state of simple deprivation. To do so, Ruskin briefly turns to music to examine the "true relations of

[64] *Ibid.*, 175.

[65] *Ibid.*, 177.

[66] *Ibid.*, 176.

monotony and change" where he identifies a primary "sublimity and majesty" in monotony. This discussion extends to all of nature and the attendant sublimity of the sea, where "majesty" emerges with monotony. Specifically, Ruskin argues that the musician must break with monotony after a certain time and notes two possible ways in which this is generally done, first by introducing small depth and harmonic variations into the monotonous rhythm, or alternatively, by introducing an entirely new passage. There are two analogies in nature for this process: a correlate to the first method of internal variation can be noted in the small pattern variations of the ocean's waves. With respect to the second, where an entirely new passage is introduced to break the monotony, an analogy can be found in nature in the example of an unchanging field that is broken by uniquely by a large stone. Thus, with a certain degree of synesthesia across the fields of sight and sound, monotony comes to figure as a fundamental element in a rhythmic economy of aesthetic theory: an economy of pleasure that depends on an exchange and tension between change and monotony.

The Black Sun: Monotony and Depression

According to Ruskin, the artist's genius is expressed through manifestations of variation rather than sheer repetition, through a capacity for invention and novelty rather than monotony. This potential for "perpetual novelty" as an aspect of genius develops digressively from his introductory discussion of medieval architecture with its manifold variations that place its ornamentation closer to the revolutionary and free than to the servile in his over-arching models for types of labour and production of ornament in architecture. The genius is therefore free of the need to defer to a master-authority.

In contrast to the figure of the brooding melancholic, consider that of the toiling worker whose repetitive motions are monotonously executed, with neither beginning nor end in sight. At the beginning of the industrial era, this figure still might labour independently, as an artisan, with their hands, like Silas Marner: "The livelong day he sat in his loom, his ear filled with its monotony, his eyes bent close down on the slow growth of sameness in the brownish web, his muscles moving with such even repetition that their pause seemed almost as much a constraint as the holding of his breath."[67] With rise of industrialization, this toil increasingly takes place with machines, and on a large scale, in factories and mines. Such monotonous experience of toil is unrelenting, and if change looms on the horizon, it is only as a fading perception. Yet, while the melancholics might express themselves with monotony, their sense of stagnation is libidinal rather than purely material and based on necessity. Ruskin's perceived economy of monotony and change in relation to the builder's agency is based on a pre-industrial vision of work. The figure of the melancholic, however, remains a relatively unchanged transhistorical phenonmenon across these shifting economies.

In the figure of melancholic genius, a potential economy of monotony and change takes shape in the field of desire, as a libidinal economy. Genius is traditionally associated with melancholy, which is depicted in classical and renaissance periods as burdensome (consider Durer's *Melancolia* for example), as stagnation and immobility, or in the Middle Ages as *acedia*, in which the desired object figures as an unattainable lack, a negative possession, "reversing privation as possession" and arising with or as a result of a co-extensive

[67] George Eliot, *Silas Marner* (Dover Publications, 2012), 27.

inability to act.[68] Afflicted by the "noonday demon," in torpor and tortured, the melancholic struggles with their own wilfulness in the realization that their anticipated desire is one of loss.

Despite such desperation and torpor, which has long associated with slothful melancholy, melancholy has been seen to go hand-in-hand with genius and invention since Aristotle first articulated the connection. If monotony surfaces, it is as the antithesis of human genius, exemplified first by nature and then by the machine as the mode of production proper to that which cannot think and that which the human genius abhors. In Book III of the *Problemata,* Aristotle famously asks, "Why is it that all men who have become outstanding in philosophy, statesmanship, poetry or the arts are melancholic and some to such an extent that they are infected by the diseases arising from black bile […]?"[69] Since, a plethora of answers to Aristotle's question have emerged, while different eras saw sufferers of melancholy or depression alternately condemned and glamorized. Andrew Solomon traces the history of melancholy and later depression in *The Noonday Demon* where he offers numerous examples of writers who suffered desperately from melancholy or depression (as characterized depending on the era in which they lived). Creation has long been accompanied by this state of melancholy that is the counterpoint of productivity, and which counts monotony as a symptom.

That monotony is one tangible indication of depression is shown, for example, by Julia Kristeva who identifies the monotonous use of language as symptomatic of the negative

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[68] Agamben, *Stanzas*, 7.

[69] Aristotle, *Problems II*: *Books XXII-XXXVIII*, Translated by W. S. Hett (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard UP and William Heinemann, (1937) 1983), 155.

pathology of depression. In the following passage from *Black Sun*, Kristeva offers "monotonous" as a characteristic key feature of melancholic speech in particular:

> Rappelez-vous la parole du déprimé : répétitive et monotone. Dans l'impossibilité d'enchaîner, la phrase s'interrompt, s'épuise, s'arrête. Les syntagmes même ne parviennent pas à se formuler. Un rythme répétitif, une mélodie monotone, viennent dominer les séquences logiques brisées et les transformer en litanies récurrentes, obsédantes. Enfin, lorsque cette musicalité frugale s'épuise à son tour, ou simplement ne réussit pas à s'installer à force de silence, la mélancolique semble suspendre avec la profération toute idéation, sombrant dans le blanc de l'asymbolie ou dans le trop plein d'un chaos idéatoire inordonnable.[70]
>
> [Let us keep in mind the speech of the depressed — repetitive and monotonous. Faced with the impossibility of concatenating, they utter sentences that are interrupted, exhausted, come to a standstill. Even phrases they cannot formulate. A repetitive rhythm, a monotonous melody emerge and dominate the broken logical sequence, changing them into recurring, obsessive litanies. Finally, when that frugal musicality becomes exhausted in turn, or simply does not succeed in becoming established on account of the pressure of silence, the melancholy person appears to stop cognizing as well as uttering, sinking into the blankness of symbolia or the excess of an unorderable cognitive chaos.][71]

While depression is a modern pathology, melancholy is a concept that extends across multiple historical periods and has its contemporary analog in studies of depression, and thus Kristeva's

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[70] Julia Kristeva, *Soleil Noir* : *Dépression et mélancolie* (Paris : Gallimard, 1987), 45.

[71] Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia,* Translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 33.

reference to the "melancholy person" where melancholy comes to function as a synonym for depression. This depressive communicates their state of mind as much by the form of their speech as by its content; Kristeva emphasizes the melody and rhythm of speech as significant above and beyond the semantic function of language itself, where the formal aspect of language, its rhythm and melody, is as meaningful as its content, whether that is repetitious or not. Kristeva's observations affirm the equally meaningful importance of non-verbal aspects of speech such as rhythm and gesture within the clinical setting. Further, that the monotonous musicality is cast as "frugal" notably locates the functions of rhythm and repetition in an cautious economy of expression — one that, in the case of the melancholic, avoids any excess or extravagance, by extension. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* Freud postulates that repetitious speech functions economically as an expressive compulsion toward death and displeasure because it repeats tension, which tension is associated with displeasure in Freud's thought, and therefore the compulsion to repeat is a function of the death drive. Kristeva's introduction of the notion of "monotonous" rhythm as an intrinsic aspect of depressive speech expands the possibility for an understanding of this economy in relation to poetics.

Following T. S. Eliot and Giorgio Agamben, I previously noted that poetry is seen *to live* in a tension between "sound and sense" or "fixity and flux." By extension, monotony, which is the failure of this tension, must announce the death or the "end" of the poem as we know it. Further, following Freud and Kristeva, it becomes possible to conceive that underlying the semantic complexity of any poem is an essential rhythmic tension that is a product of the death drive and against which an intrinsically lyrical erotic force, in the form of the address to the beloved for example, intensifies and is the life of poetry. The vitality of poetry can therefore be severed only by an intensification of tension to the point where it

breaks like a wave against a rock and slackens irreparably in the abandonment of all rhythm, even of monotony. Then the language that remains is a residue-stained surface, mundane, quiet and simple, concealing the poem's pointed death in dullness and disillusion.

While the aim of the pleasure principle in Freud's thought is the release of tension in search of pleasure, and therefore quite linear as an aim, poetic tension is, on the surface, less direct and linear in its function. In part, this is because the existence of tension is essential to the poem's vitality and therefore also an important feature of aesthetic pleasure. Therefore poetic tension is not a currency that can be cashed in at each juncture, because it is a friction created by multiple oppositions, and it produces a multitude of frictions, of harmonies and cacophonies of frictions.

Monotony and the Neutral

The monotonous by reason of its repetitious nature and by its sameness, and more so, by its oneness, evades origins. Monotony has neither beginning nor end; it is an ongoing regularity without cessation. Yet its duration is remarkable like glass that withstands all the random force of weather against it. The monotonous continues in time despite and even against its own fragility. Its tedious hard rule comes to form a husk of sounding around the future and the past, encasing temporality in sameness or oneness that denies lateral distinctions and difference. The monotonous knows no sides but only its singular uniformity, which may lapse into series of slackness or drown with one terrible wave of sameness, never ceasing, never subsiding to leave a visible froth of knowledge in its path. No fluidity lasts as long as this unchanging one, none is as unacceptable, and nothing else is as rejected by vitality without being actually turned toward death.

The future appears as a semicolon in the sentence of the past, but monotony never pauses, never hesitates, never stops. It desires neither a before nor afterward, and it knows no grammatical tense. Its subject too is reduced to a matter of permanence in flux. Roses dry in a vase on the windowsill, petals crumbling, curtains drawn. Unlike melancholy, which is steeped in judgment, monotony is neutral continuation, but while its neutrality seems innocent like the neutral duration of sunlight or moonlight and diurnal closure, monotony is without beginning and end. Its body does not succumb in time as the ageing organism. It is a sounding that revolts against mortality and yet simultaneously rejects vitality because to accept life would mean to acknowledge death. Monotony acknowledges nothing in time and that is its power and that is the principle that renders it unpleasant, even dangerous. It lacks moderation and variation, and its lack of variation is an immoderate extension in time.

To designate monotony as a form of neutrality implies, first of all, that it assumes an impartial form. Monotony, which knows no sides, is predisposed to absolute neutrality. Moreover, the monotonous structure does not confer a context that would be a part of judgment and therefore it is apart from judgment in its neutrality. Monotony knows no sides and so it approximates indifference both in form and judgment. Neutral, detached, indifferent and uninvolved, the monotonous form emerges without the fury of futurity just as it remains apart from literary history and styles of former legitimacy. As such it is exquisitely and resolutely present.

The notion of melancholy assumes positions of hesitation, doubt and procrastination, but monotony does not hesitate; it is pure certainty and unwavering continuance. Melancholy's doubts are plural and arise from its capacity to assume many positions at once and thus the overwhelmed state in which melancholics find themselves immobilized in

indecisiveness and inaction, undone by a capacity for complexity and an accompanying anxiety about the future. But monotony is singularly simple and without doubt or grief. This is because it is apart from judgment and because it anticipates no ending. This is its potential violence. Its inevitable duration is its ceremony of certainty, but know that it is deadly certain, with a sureness that supersedes the notion of expectation. In monotony, there is no doubt and no alternative, there is no stopping, there is no judgment, and this is its absolute danger.

Chapter Two

Playing the Index: The Structure of Neutrality

Le hasard. Dans quel ordre mettre les figures, puisqu'il faut que le sens ne prenne pas? […] Donc procédure arbitraire de consécution. L'année dernière, l'alphabet. Cette année, renforcement de l'aléatoire : Intitulé → Ordre alphabétique → Numérotation […] Je voudrais faire remarquer que mes efforts répétés pour employer et justifier une exposition aléatoire (en rupture avec la forme « dissertation ») n'ont jamais eu aucun écho. On admet de commenter, de discuter l'idée de fragment, on admet une théorie du fragment, on m'interviewe là-dessus — mais on ne se rend pas compte quel problème c'est de décider dans quel ordre on les mettra. Or le vrai problème du fragment est là […] Pour moi, balbutiement : hasard « électronique » = solution.

— Roland Barthes, *Le Neutre*

The letter is autonomous but only prior to signification.

— Erin Moure, *My Beloved Wager*

Introduction

If the regularity of any system is constant and unbending, then monotony may be said to represent the application of any system with constant regularity. This explains how monotony can be constant and repetitious at once. It is a continuous application of a repetitious system or a repetitious application of a continuous system. Monotony as a form of regularity operates according to rules that render it totally predictable, unlike the constraints of stylistic convention.

The rule is a norm that is law and that is orderly, whereas the convention is traditional, ceremonious and grounded in conformity. For example, we might say that a content-focused lyric poetry (i.e., what became of free verse in the twentieth century) is conformist because it adopts as its informal model a longstanding canonical apparatus of style. Opposed to this, the notion of a post-lyrical or *content-less* poetics of appropriation and transcription is often claimed in contemporary poetry. However, in this chapter, I argue for a third approach in contemporary poetics, one that represents a glissement or a slippage from the dilemma posed by the overwhelming opposition of content to form. In this chapter, I argue for a poetics that appropriates the structure of a paratextual or threshold element: the alphabetical index. This work may be called threshold poetics: not without content, on the threshold of form.

On the one hand, this work differs structurally from most lyric poetry and as such is hardly recognizable as lyric poetry according to conventions of form. It draws upon poetry's lyric legacy even as it is *informed* by a regular, apparently neutral system commonly deployed in information science: the alphabetical index. This form of non-intentional or aleatory poetics

abides by the rules of an alphabetic ordering system as it resists conforming to generic conventions and to the notion of genre itself.[72]

In the literary works discussed in this chapter, the overarching structural system deployed in the process of poiesis is, as noted, that of alphabetic order, a system traditionally deployed to arrange information, for example in book indexes. According to this structure, the primary letter-principle governing the sequential order of fragments functions autonomously from the signification of the content. The letter is of language, but in this usage it is also the outside of a language, literally exceeding this language as it emerges on the threshold of the paratextual to form a random order.

Just as Inger Christensen's long serial poem *alphabet*, discussed in the previous chapter, is organized according to alphabetical order, the following works use this basic system as formal, acrostic scaffolding. First, Louis Zukofsky's life-long work *"A"* (1928-1974) is supplemented by an index comprised of unusual terms (including parts of speech such as indefinite articles and conjunctions). Second, Alan Halsey's "An Index to Shelley's Death" appears at the end of his book-length work *The Text of Shelley's Death* (published 2001), an index that is composed not of keywords but of lineated poetic fragments the writer gathered in the process of researching the work. Third, Lisa Robertson's *Cinema of the Present,* published

[72] It is important to specify that the term aleatory as it is used here, may recall the deterministic and chance procedures that that were deployed by writers such as Jackson MacLow or John Cage (especially Cage's mesostics), or even Mallarmé, yet it operates somewhat differently in the texts discussed below. In the following discussion, the aleatory does not impart a compositional principle per se, but supplies a secondary, framing device, an operation that imposes a randomizing order on a chaos of fragments, as in Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* for example, which exemplifies the problem of a series of fragments that are brought together as adjacent entries in a catalogue.

in 2014, is a book-length poetic work with a double structure: lines of poetry are arranged in alternating alphabetic order and random sequence as every line (or almost every line, to be precise) appears twice in the work, once in alphabetic sequence and once randomly. Finally, Carolyn Bergvall's *Via* (published in 2003) is a poetic work that, like an archive, is comprised entirely of found material: extant texts that are then systemically ordered. At stake in these literary experiments is a reformulation of the extent of the author's role in constructing meaning, for the alphabetic order supplies a simple technological and arguably neutral form, a device for "ordering the fragments" that is universally used in Western alphabetic cultures and that imparts a structure that is uninformed by individual authorial intention.

We have noted that the alphabetic order randomly organizes things because it is a neutral device, yet is the given order it imposes on the uncompromising randomness of chaos in fact neutral? Is any imperative to order neutral? Alphabetizing textual fragments means to respond in some part to the demand for rational order, even while rejecting narrative exigencies of temporal progression, stable location or the concerns of a subject that is instituted across time and space. In the texts I discuss in this chapter, the subject is decentered in the work of re-assembling fragments. As Barthes suggests, the randomness of alphabetical order dismantles a text's originary intentions:

> Il se souvient à peu près de l'ordre dans lequel il a écrit ces fragments ; mais d'où venait cet ordre ? Au fur et à mesure de quel classement, de quelle suite ? Il ne s'en souvient plus. L'ordre alphabétique efface tout, refoule toute origine. Peut-être, par endroits, certains fragments ont l'air de se suivre par affinité ; mais l'important, c'est que ces petits réseaux ne soient pas raccordés, c'est qu'ils ne glissent pas à un seul et grand réseau qui serait la structure du livre, son sens. C'est pour arrêter, dévier, diviser cette descente du discours vers un destin du sujet, qu'à certains moments l'alphabet

> vous rappelle à l'ordre (du désordre) et vous dit : *Coupez ! Reprenez l'histoire d'une autre manière* (mais aussi, parfois, pour la même raison, il faut casser l'alphabet).[73] [He more or less remembers the order in which he wrote these fragments; but where did that order come from? In the course of what classification, of what succession? He no longer remembers. The alphabetical order erases everything, banishes every origin. Perhaps in places, certain fragments seem to follow one another by some affinity; but the important thing is that these little networks not be connected, that they not slide into a single enormous network which would be the structure of the book, its meaning. It is in order to halt, to deflect, to divide this descent of discourse toward a destiny of the subject, that at certain moments the alphabet calls you to order (to disorder) and says: Cut! Resume the story in another way (but also, sometimes for the same reason, you must break up the alphabet).][74]

Barthes suggests that alphabetical order "erases every origin" as it frees the subject to continue in a state of flux and contiguous formation that is always commencing. It is a form that does not trap the text in a surplus of signification but, quite the contrary, releases poetic signification from the bonds of representation as convention and releases the poem from the conventions of verse. It also offers another way of considering the poem formally, as a collection of fragments, such as Barthes', instead of a unified vision of an instance in time, as the notion of the free-verse lyric has defined the poem.[75] The random ordering of the text

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[73] Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Éditions du Seuil, 1975), 178.

[74] Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 148.

supplies an element of levity and allows fresh air into the text, air that seeps between the fragments simultaneously and that fills the lungs of the reader as a freedom that arises in the act of reading. For the alphabetical order is as basic as air, as invisible and as innocent, and it belongs to no one. Formatively, it is a randomizing system and therefore one which can be seen on the one hand to impose a searchable order on a mass of chaos, or on the other hand, it can be seen to free the text from the conventions of reason, of origin, of temporal progression, of linearity, teleology and closure.

However, while it may be innovative to structure a long or serial literary work according to the random and arguably neutral scaffolding of alphabetic order, the alphabet itself is hardly a new technology. It persists as the most essential technology for writing in the West as we know it, in function basically unchanging even while the modes of textual input and circulation have changed over millennia. The concept of using alphabetical order for the organization and retrieval of knowledge did not appear until the Middle Ages, when the idea of the book index was introduced to help readers locate information in texts systemically. The alphabetical index emerged as a new technology in an era when knowledge was still

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[75] Marjorie Perloff identifies the six key characteristics of lyric poetry, which can be summarized as follows: 1) free verse uses variable sound patterns to describe a feeling subject's relationship (that of the 'I') to some incomprehensible aspect of the world that needs to be resolved; 2) free verse is organized according to the power of the image, following both the Symbolist tradition in Francophone poetry and the Imagist tradition in Anglophone poetry; 3) although free verse is speech-based, its syntax is regular and the subject speaks in sentences; 4) it flows in a linear fashion toward closure; 5) free verse enacts a continuity of rhythm that depends on unobtrusive sound structures, and guarantees a linear reading toward the closure mentioned in 4; and 6) free verse is remarkable for its lack of distinguishing visual characteristics (unobtrusive textual layout – following the traditions of verse). Marjorie Perloff, "After Free Verse: The New NonLinear Poetries," 94-96.

memorized by scholars (e.g., in the memory palaces discussed at length in Frances Yates' *The Art of Memory*), and when techniques of memorization were taught. In the human memory, however, knowledge was supposed to be kept in rational rather than random order. Thus, the emergence of textual supplements to reading that were arranged alphabetically accompanied a conceptual leap from rational to random order, while former imaginative mnemonic techniques were rendered redundant. Ivan Illich, in his commentary on Hugh's *Didascalicon*, indicates that the introduction of alphabetical order constituted a major innovation:

> The use of signs for both consonants (which are obstacles to breath) and for vowels (which indicate the color given to the column of air that is "spirited" out of the lungs) constitutes a technique of immense social significance… But few scholars have yet realized that the arrangement of names or subjects in the order of these letters is a comparable technical breakthrough, something done in the course of a generation. In analogy to the watershed which divides pre-alphabetic Greek oral culture from Greek culture under the aegis of letters and science, so it seems reasonable to speak of the pre- and post-index Middle Ages.[76]

In *Authentic Witness: Approaches to Medieval Texts and Manuscripts*, Mary and Richard Rouse detail the gradual introduction of alphabetically ordered textual "supplements" starting in the late twelfth century and note a general resistance to this new order arising from a contemporary preference for 'logical' or 'rational' order, which continued to dominate scholarship into the thirteenth century. The learned reader was expected to discern rational relationships between the parts of the universe, which was imagined to form a harmonious

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[76] Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh's Didascalion* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), 103.

whole until the introduction of alphabetical order.[77] For this reason, the Rouses' claim that "the adoption of the alphabet to order ideas, by a handful of men in the late twelfth century, implies on their part a major change in attitude toward the written word." [78] During the Middle Ages, the use of the alphabetical index would come to imply that "each user of a work will bring to it his own preconceived rational order, which may differ from those of other users and from that of the writer himself." [79]

That a particular rational order could be the entitlement of each reader attested to a burgeoning access to literature and information such that readers would in theory be free to develop their own understanding of the harmonious universe as a result. The index, while remaining relegated to the status of paratext as a threshold reading element, guides the reader

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[77] Even though alphabetical order implied a random and neutral ordering system that was universally available, it was not applied in strictly precise fashion — at least, alphabetization did not generally extend beyond the first syllable of the word — as Frances Witty shows in her work on late medieval manuscripts.

[78] Mary A. and Richard H Rouse, *Authentic Witness: Approaches to Medieval Manuscripts and Texts* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 202.

[79] *Ibid*., 204. While the alphabetical index was introduced in the Middle Ages, it pre-dated printing by a few hundred years, meaning that book indexes were, like the manuscript text they referred to, composed by hand. The precise, standardized index that would eventually be incorporated as part of the book itself was not in existence until after the printing press was invented. A further complication of this system could also be seen in the existence of two types of indexes: the ready-made index which was available for classics, and the individual reader's or owner-produced index which would be made by a book's owner in the case of contemporary works. (*Ibid.,* 231, 255)

in the reading process. It is illustrated in marginalia as a finger: a manicule, pointing finger, index finger, digit, informer, sign, maker of the known.[80]

Louis Zukofsky's "Index of Names and Objects"

Given the technical status of the alphabetical index as a reference tool for information retrieval, and the fact that to all literary intents and purposes of exegesis it remains mostly marginal as a mere textual supplement or paratext, its emergent appearance as a literary genre in works of poetry is particularly curious. One such modern example is the index that appears at the end of Louis Zukofsky's long poem *"A,"* a life-long work and serial poem, the first half of which was published in 1940, and subsequent parts then published in serial increments until the complete text of the long poem appeared in 1978. Several poetic concerns seem to be at work shaping the index found at the end of *"A,"* with its unusually broad range of subjects, from the proper names and ideas that are common to indexes, to common nouns that name parts of the body or quotidian things, to the inclusion even of simple grammatical articles, such as "a" itself. Notably, in "How to End a Life's Work: Louis Zukofsky's Indexes," Abigail Lang points out that, in his early writings on objectivism, he had celebrated the notion of "the entirety of the single word, which is in itself a relation, an implied metaphor, an

[80] From the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *s.v.*. "index": Origin ME from L. index, indic- 'forefinger, informer, sign' from in- 'towards' + a second element rel. to dicere 'say' or dicare 'make known'; indicium – Latin "informer, sign."

arrangement and a harmony."[81] Lang suggests that the index functions doubly in Zukofky's work, as a list poem unto itself, wherein each word is cast as a stronghold of its own harmony, but also as an index: a reference tool that leads the reader back into the text of *"A"* in infinitely various ways. Thus, Lang suggests, Zukofsky's index "rounds off" the text by inviting the reader back in. Like a swinging door, the index acts as an antidote to the problem of the "end of the poem," that is, the poem's inevitable failure in the act of ending, such as is proposed by Agamben, which I discuss in Chapter One. Doubling as a poem and paratextual device pointing into another work, the poet's index to *"A"* invites the reader to hesitate on the threshold of the book, potentially to turn back the page and re-enter the poem. Zukofsky's index creates a slippery continuity between the notion of the text and paratext by complicating the boundaries between them, blurring the distinction between their intended usage. In the following excerpt, proper names such as Amsterdam and Alexander are poetically mixed in with common nouns such as 'air' or 'action' or indefinite articles such as 'a' and 'an':

[81] Abigail Lang, "How to End a Life's Work: Louis Zukofsky's Indexes," *SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature* 18 (2006): 131.

INDEX OF NAMES & OBJECTS

Fig. 2. Louis Zukofsky, "Index of Names and Objects." From *"A."* New York: New Directions, 2011.

If Zukofsky's idea of objectivism emphasizes the word as its own complete context and thus a beginning and ending unto itself, it does so as an embrace of the reader's attentiveness and freedom, in turn, to choose to enter and re-enter the poem alternatively and according to their inclination, guided by the page numbers given in the index. In Zukofsky's *"A"* the concluding index does not so much end the poem as provide another possibility in lieu of ending, a terminal supplement that introduces another set of conceptual affinities and, while adhering to the poem that has gone before, remains compacted and different in its form that glows with the aura of each word in its complete harmony. The "Index of Names and Objects" is not instrumental to research, unlike an ordinary index; it does not a supply a short cut, as it does not lead anywhere definitive or purposeful. It intends no end, like the poem that resists ending and closure. Zukofsky parodies the paratextual index, and defamiliarizes it for the reader in the processs, disrupting its ordinary function and instrumentality.

Alan Halsey's "Index to Shelley's Death"

If Zukofsky's index redresses the notion of closure and acts as a new departure for the reader in a process of reassessing the end of the poem, it finds an analog in a late twentieth-century literary work that ends with a poetic index (or more precisely, with a poem called an "Index"), *The Text of Shelley's Death* by Alan Halsey. In this case, because the general theme of Halsey's work is the mythic nature of Percy Bysshe Shelley's death in a boat accident and multiple conflicting accounts thereof, the problem of poetic ending and closure in relation to the subject is doubly invested with significance. In Halsey's rendering of the conflicting stories of Shelley's death, which remains mostly shrouded in mystery, we quickly perceive

that there are no definitive facts to be related, but only copious versions of contradictory information to be transmitted, variations on the truth that blur the boundary between the literary and documentary with such persistence that "the reader … comes, with reason, to suspect a double meaning in every line."[82] However, as we shall see, the "Index" at the end of this book, while occupying the position typical of an index as that which comes *after* (both in terms of the time of composition and the material space of the book), in fact constitutes yet another poem that bears few of the typical features of an index. Further, while its structure is systemic and therefore as predictable as an alphabetic list, there is nothing repetitive or monotonous about Halsey's index, which arranges lines of Shelley's verse and other notes. Halsey's index is an alphabetic list poem, compiled from the residue of his research — for example, unincorporated lines from Shelley's verse and other notes — or in other words, unused lines and research that remained after Halsey had completed the first two parts of the book, the first of which is a long prose poem and the second, a short expository essay. These residual fragments are the tonally rich debris of an archive, and as such, are lyrically useless. Thus, the index provides for a melancholy containment: although the index formally belongs to the category of informational, technical device, Halsey's is definitively lyrical, the inconclusive, haunting persistence of the mystery of Shelley's death emerging between broken lines of verse and text. With its line breaks, the index might seem more recognizable as a poem than the long prose work to which it is attached, which ironically claims to relate the "events of [Shelley's] life" in "language energetic and simple (*var.* monotonous, emphatic)," a

[82] Alan Halsey, *The Text of Shelley's Death* (Sheffield: West House Books, 2001), 71.

doubling of voice through variations that calls any sincerity into question.[83] Since every story relating Shelley's death is categorically inventive and allusively literary, any clear border that might exist between literary imagination and documentary fact is confounded by references that point across the line.

The Text of Shelley's Death never purports to offer a definitive text or history as such. A collection of versions of the story of Shelley's death, it claims no greater legitimacy for one over the other, allowing the differing testimony of multiple voices to co-mingle with their inconsistencies and contradictions while the author remains neutral, without weighing the veracity of the tales recounted. The irony of the first line, "Everybody knows the text of Shelley's death," is precisely that there is no such text and therefore there is nothing definitive to be known. It is not that "no one knows" but rather that everyone knows there is nothing to know, in fact.

Halsey uses the form of the variorium to allow these multiple versions to surface. As noted, the work is organized in three main parts: the first part is a poetic collage of multiple versions or "tellings" of the tragedy and "an embodiment of contradiction"; the second part is an expository account of the various tellings that have informed the author's research; and the third part, appearing in the customary place of a book appendix is the aforementioned "Index to Shelley's Death."[84] Poets Lisa Robertson and Matthew Staedler note in their gloss on Halsey's text that it takes the form of the variorum in order to:

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[83] *Ibid.,*14

[84] *Ibid.*, 61.

> track the proliferating differences in the many accounts of the Shelley story, including Trelawney's, the Tuscan authorities, Mary Shelley's, the spy Torelli's, Byron's, all of the individuals in the Shelley circle and a whole lineage of later embellishers. Although this is death, no final story will be possible. Repeating, doubling, self-contradicting, it starts off in multiple directions, returning repeatedly and hypnotically to the altered and shimmering motif: a boat, a storm, three corpses. This is the project's closing index; it sets the tale loose like a burning ghostship.[85]

The metaphor of the ghost-ship is doubly apt, first as the disappearing boat in which Shelley's fatal accident occurred, but ironically as a vessel that resists total closure. The index points to the endurance of the boat, an interminable continuance. The "index" to Halsey's poem is the part of the book that is most "poetic" in form and tone; Jeffrey Robinson notes, the "topicality that one usually associates with an index becomes all signifier and movement. There are no pages numbers, nothing to look up; thus the language here is not referential… It reads like an open-form or aleatory version of a Shelley poem [….]"[86] There is nothing repetitious or monotonous about the deployment of the alphabetical "index" form in The Text of Shelley's Death. Poetically, it accretes a copious trove of nouns that complement each other to create a romantic catalogue of sea imagery, of the landscape into which Shelley disappeared. The "index" begins of course with the letter 'a':

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[85] Lisa Robertson and Matthew Staedler, eds. *Revolution: A Reader* (France: Paraguay Press, 2012), 1085.

[86] Jeffery Robinson, "Influence of Shelley," in *Active Romanticism: The Radical Impulse in Nineteenth Century and Contemporary Poetic Practice*. eds. Julie Carr and Jeffery Robinson, (Tuscaloosa : University of Alabama Press, 2015), 194.

A being within our being
A boat
A boat of rare device
A boat with swift sails winging
A dome of many-coloured glass
Airborn shapes
A lead-coloured fog
Along the dark and ruffled waters
A magic ship, whose charmèd sails should fly
A meteor of light
Amid the topmost spray, and sunbows wild, wreathed in the silver mist
Among the closing waves out of the boundless air
An isle of lovely grief […][87]

The writer Shelley's literal body disappears into the sea and mist, disfigured over the course of many days before washing up on shore (the exact number days differs according to who is telling the story), after which Shelley's dead body will be recognized as that of a reader. According to several versions of the story, Shelley's disfigured body is identifiable only because of the books found in his pocket and clenched in his hand. Halsey notes a very curious and fabulous idiosyncracy in stories regarding the book(s) (the number of books and titles vary) that were found on Shelley's water-ravaged corpse, still in his possession: according to one account, Shelley's index finger was still pressed inside the book marking the page he was

[87] Halsey, *The Text of Shelley's Death*, 73.

reading at the time the fatal tragedy struck. This incredible "detail was nevertheless entered into the Bodleian catalogue."[88] Among the various tales and tellers is this narrative:

> There was a volume of Keats in his breast pocket, but the volume of Aeschylus was in his hand, and with the finger clasped in its pages. The volume still opens at the page where Shelley had been reading when the storm arose, and the print of his finger is still to be perceived on the page. The book was in his hand when the body was found [….][89]

Here, the indexical manicule does not take the form of a mere reader's mark or guide impressed upon the margins of the page. Rather, this index appears in the outrageous form of the dead reader's actual finger, as flesh and bone morbidly clinging to the page. But what does this signify? Does it point us back into the text like the index at the end of Zukofsky's "A"? Does this pointing finger help unlock the secrets of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* by directing us into Aeschylus' work? The reader suspects there is a double significance and deeply symbolic nature to every part of the tale, as Halsey suggests. The reader remains suspicious of the tale. Yet, regardless of the hermeneutical reference implied by the title of the book in the poet's hand at the time of his death, it is notable that Shelley's relationship to reading is described in Halsey's work as so devoted as to verge on the state of possession: "a trance" it was difficult to waken him from.[90] As a reader, Shelley is described as one utterly

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[88] *Ibid*., 41.

[89] *Ibid.,* 50

[90] *Ibid.,* 35

possessed and thus without any of the ironic distance and suspicion that underscores our reading of the tale. The Dionysian state of possession that takes hold of the poet in the act of reading, and the material reference to his indexical finger immersed in the book, allude to the embodiment of reading and remind us that reading is an embodied, physical, material act.

Just as there is no one "text" for Shelley's death, there is no one text in any event, only the unique material of a given book and every reader's individual and embodied interaction with it. Both the book that is found clenched in the hand of Shelley's corpse and Halsey's work of multiple narratives suggest that there is neither an overarching narrative or text but only the unique material of the book and every reader's unique experience of that material. Halsey, an antiquarian bookseller, writes into a material tradition of human variation and human flaw, of book indexes and ghost ships, of the remnant and the fragment, of archival residue that is neither factual nor fictional, but that points to an enduring human uncertainty.

Pascal Poyet's "Present an Index" and Lisa Robertson's *Cinema of the Present*

Halsey's *Index to Shelley's Death* has no page numbers so it does not direct the reader back into the poem in the manner that, for example, the index after Zukofsky's "A" has the potential to do. Although this text is called an index, is arranged alphabetically and appears at the end of Halsey's work as a sort of supplement that pushes against closure, any resemblance to the conventional reference tool ends there. Similarly, at the end of Lisa Robertson's poetic work *Cinema of the Present* there appears a two-page poem (or is it an index?) called "Present: An Index." Of particular interest in this case is that this "index" has an author:

Pascal Poyet.[91] Certainly, an index is one of those paratextual elements that is not generally *authored*, at least insofar as the authorship of an index is not commonly rendered visible, and as such is considered subjectively neutral, yet the compilation of any index does entail a subjective selection of terms, as Zukofsky's index shows, and a decision either to correspond to the norms of discourse or to conform to a text's unique parameters or to another artistic order. Commonly, what we consider to be the "index" is thus often presented as a neutral objective phenomenon. In this case, the index in question is authored by a translator, a further complication with regard to ascribed notions of neutrality and transparency (or invisibility to use Lawrence Venuti's term), an interesting admission. Pascal Poyet's "index" is in fact a document of the translation process in which he was engaged with *Cinema of the Present*.[92] His index is comprised of translation residue that doubles as a supplement to the English-language work. Generally, the figure of the translator is only slightly more visible than that of the indexer, existing mostly unnoticed in the shadow of the author, as a sort of ghostly guide for the reader, but that is seen to point to an original rather than to itself.

Poyet's index is arranged alphabetically, but it contains no page numbers and does not direct the reader back into the text. In fact, it is not immediately clear what relationship, if any, exists between Robertson's work and Poyet's index (perhaps Poyet's index is a translator's

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[91] At the end of Lisa Robertson's *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*, there is an "Index" by Stacey Doris, which is lyrical and whimsical in its composition (including a list of terms such as: "scumble, sincerity's eroticism, sleaze, snowy cordillera, socket, solitude in chaos, spindly blooming tree," etc.) and which also begins with a Lucretian swerve, with two terms out of (alphabetical) order.

[92] Poyet's translation was published as *Cinéma du Présent* by Théâtre Typographique in 2015.

lexicon of key concepts in Robertson's work?). "Present: An Index" is composed of alphabetized clusters of key words, each of which consists uniformly of three words, end-stopped with a period:

> Again, again, again.
> Absolutely, totally, love.
> Annotation, authority, apricot.
> Anonymous, sense, unfounding.
> Arrive, argument, aroma.
> Became, becomes, bodies.
> Body, hotel, surfaces.
> Burning, insult, speculative…[93]

For the most part, these three-word clusters do not originate as such in Robertson's text, but emerge, rather, as a response to that text's conceptual framework and structure. Structurally, the lines in Robertson's work are not traditional poetic lines with enjambment but rather spatially separated prose sentences that are end-stopped by a period. Further, Poyet's index structurally reflects a base-line constructional scaffolding in Robertson's work that relies on alphabetization. In this way, Poyet's index points to both the elements of stopping and systemic alphabetization in Robertson's work, a performance that demonstrates an analytical reading of the text. Additionally, Poyet notes that the choice to group the words by three is also informed by the syntactical structures of Robertson's sentences. Each of Poyet's clusters of three words appears as a constellation, a unit that suggests internal resonance, the

[93] Pascal Poyet, "Present: An Index," in Lisa Robertson, *Cinema of the Present,* 108-109.

words' mutual complementarity, potential combinatory or reverberative meaning. However, unlike an astral body, each of these words is grounded by deep roots that remain, regardless, invulnerable to new associations, and so Poyet's index, when read in its entirety, is driven by an inexorable monotony as the habitual simplicity of these words is underscored in repetitive rhythm.

It is perhaps only the fact of punctuation that wrests Poyet's indexical list from an iteration of pure monotony, for the list is truly broken only by the periods appearing after each third word — breaking the monotony even if that breakage occurs with predictable regularity. Earlier I noted that Poyet's index takes several structural and conceptual cues from Robertson's *Cinema of the Present*; however the tropes of repetition and systematization that inform the structure of the index are complicated differently in Robertson's work. Poyet's "Present: An Index" is like a monotonously pulsing neon sign outside a cinema of reeling, fluid imagery.

Although the alphabetic system does provide the scaffolding for Lisa Robertson's *Cinema of the Present*, it constitutes only one half of the long poem's bipartite structure.[94] I say this in an effort to describe the work structurally for it will not be summarized in any other way, as is the case of poetry in general, although Robertson herself doubts this work can be

[94] Notably, this same formal structure can be seen in the first part of Robertson's *R's Boat*, published in 2010 (four years prior to the publication of *Cinema of the Present*). However, the patterning of the alphabet as an ordered chaos that loosely evades deterministic systems also appears in an earlier work by Robertson, *The Weather*. Here the alphabet does not isolate lines of poetry as organized entries in a system, but rather swirls as a wind system in a general movement toward Z, a general, organic system.

classified as a poem.[95] *Cinema of the Present* is an extension of an idea and an elasticity that calls into question the nature of duality, the duality of you and I, or monotony and freedom, or laboriousness and pleasure. It is two-sided and double-edged. It has two distinct parts but they are repetitions of each other and co-mingle. For the purposes of this conversation, these two parts can be identified superficially by their font, one regular, the other italic. The alphabetically organized text is the italicized sequence. At the very beginning of this sequence, including all the lines starting with the indefinite article "a," the second term (either a noun or adjective) determines word order, creating a counter-current against the repetition of the initial article:

> You move into the distributive texture of an experimental protocol.
>
> *A bunch of uncanniness emerges.*
>
> At 20 hertz it becomes touch.
>
> *A concomitant gate.*
>
> At the middle of your life on a Sunday.
>
> *A dove, a crowned warbler in redwood, an alarm, it stops.*
>
> You set out from consciousness carrying only a small valise.
>
> *A downtown tree, the old sky, and still you want an inventory.*
>
> You were an institution without a concept.
>
> *A gallery, a hospital, an hypothesis.*

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[95] Personal interview with the author (December 2012).

Pure gesture.[96]

While the italicized lines are sequenced in alphabetic order, the alternating sequence of lines is arranged according to an order that is non-systemic. However, all the italicized lines and alternating lines are re-organizations of the same work, such that the lines appear twice in the book (with a few irregularities), once in italics and once in regular font, once in an order determined by alphabetic sequence and once in an indeterminate order. That is, more precisely: once according to random order determined by the alphabetic system and once according to a non-intentional order, potential chaos or weather. Robertson has explored the poetics of systems in previous work, such as the "formal inexhaustibility" of random weather patterns in *The Weather*.[97] Meteorological patterns endlessly vary and swerve from predicted course. The meteorologist embellishes the weather with descriptive language that hangs richly against discursive patterns that propose sheer predictability. This embellishment functions as an admission of the pure failure of predictable forecasting, like any beauty that catches one off-guard.

Indeed, *Cinema of the Present* is prefaced by an allusion to the nature of the poetics of systems and the chance discoveries that seep into these systems; the epigraph by Émile Beneviste reads as follows: "In addition, one must allow for chance discoveries, always possible in this vast domain in which the investigation has not been systematically pursued."[98]

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[96] Lisa Robertson, *Cinema of the Present* (Toronto : Coach House Books, 2014), 5.

[97] Lisa Robertson. "The Weather: A Report on Sincerity." *Chicago Review*. Vol. 51/52 Issue 4/1 (Spring 2006): 36.

Indeed, on the first page of *Cinema of the Present*, such pattern irregularities present themselves: specifically, drifting lines that will not be repeated in the second half of the book and thus insert an element of chance into the system. Similarly, the work ends with pattern irregularities, the alphabetic order crumbling or bending under the pressure of the system, enacting another Lucretian swerve, introducing an additional element of chaos and chance into the system of letters.

If for Lucretius, the types of particles in the universe remain constant and eternally present, infinite in number, and they are limited in "shape and size. They are like the letters in an alphabet, a discrete set capable of being combined in an infinite number of sentences."[99] Possible combinations of atoms in Lucretius' universe are limited to certain legible or coherent forms, in the same way that letters of the alphabet can only be used in certain combinations determined by a code. Nature's code figures as an unknowable determinant of composition for Lucretius. When the index functions to determine poetic composition, what code is enacted? The poem's determining index makes it a self-reflexive system, since the structuring principal is found within the material to be structured, and the index points only to itself. Robertson's use of alphabetic order, along with the works of the other authors mentioned above, draws attention to the letters themselves, the very compositional units of words. In other words, there is nothing outside the material of the poem that orders and structures it but the material itself, the particles of written language.

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[98] Émile Beneviste as cited by Lisa Robertson, *Cinema of the Present*.

[99] Stephan Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 187.

The Lucretian swerve represents the element of chance that alters the system and affirms the possibility of free will. It therefore accounts for an aspect of unpredictability that the system could not anticipate. In terms of rhythm, on the one hand there is monotony, which is pure predictability, since it neither begins nor ends and does not vary. As an element of chance, the swerve on the other hand appears as that which folds or twists a monotonous surface, inserts tension and affect and is the *vitality* of the poem. On a literal level, it is that which disrupts the predictable sequencing of *Cinema of the Present* at the beginning and end of the text, and offers us a way of explicating the existence of unruly pinches in the system.

This very material swerve at the end of Robertson's text also shows that it is a work of literature that pushes against closure. Indeed, all of the works discussed above share such a redress of closure. Zukofsky's *"A"* terminates with an index that, as Abigail Lang argues, functions doubly both to point the reader back into the poem but also as a supplemental poem unto itself. Halsey's "Index to Shelley's Death" comes after a work of multiple incompatible narratives where fact and fiction are interchangeable and equally valid, as coherence becomes a matter of re-assessing the notion of closure. Authorless by nature, these indexes (which have none of the traditional features of indexes such as page numbers) read as list poems. As lists, these poems clearly do not work toward closure in the way of free verse poetry but instead toward an openness of form that sets the text adrift.

Barthes, Dante and the Mid-life Turn

While the poems discussed above each appear as a supplement to another text, Caroline Bergvall's "Via" is an indexical work that stands at a more distant remove from the text or

texts to which it points. "Via" collates extant versions in English translation of the first stanza of Dante's *Inferno* and presents them in an alphabetically-ordered arrangment. While Bergvall's project highlights the misconceived neutrality of the apparently ubiquitous and anonymous translator's voice, the repetitive notion of "mid-life" points beyond the historicity of any individual's life to the timelessness of this turning point, which strikes when one is at the far reaches of both birth and death at once.

"*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*" — Roland Barthes considers this line from Dante about mid-life in his lecture course presented (ironically, at the end of his life) at the Collège de France, collected under the title *La Préparation du roman* (*The Preparation of the Novel*). For Barthes, the "mid-life" turning point is not mathematical: *qui le saurait en avance* "for who could calculate it in advance?" Instead, "it relates to an event, a moment, a change experienced as meaningful, solemn, a sort of 'total' realization of precisely the kind that can determine and consecrate a journey, a peregrination in a new continent…"[100] It announces itself as an awareness of a diverging path, such as is articulated by Dante, at the forks in the wood. Barthes identifies three forms in which this experience of awareness may occur. The first experience of the mid-life event takes the form of a realization of one's own mortality, the sense that "our days are numbered" even if we can't calculate exactly how many we have left, accompanied by the consciousness that we are surely running out of time, that our time is limited.[101] Secondly, Barthes suggests that another effect of the mid-life experience is the

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[100] Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, Trans. Kate Briggs (New York : Columbia University Press, 2011), 3.

[101] *Ibid.*, 4.

feeling that all the work one has done is *repetitive*. This is when one can predict exactly what one will be doing throughout the rest of life, until death. "Foreclosure of anything New." "Condemned to repetition?"[102] This moment, when we can no longer expect to change, is comparable to a realization of one's mortality. Finally, Barthes notes that a traumatic event can also elicit a realization of the "mid-life" point, as a sort of painful incision that cuts a life in two. In all these cases, "whatever the nature of the incident, the middle of my life is nothing other than the moment when one realizes that death is real (to go back to Dante, *The Divine Comedy* is the very *panorama* of the reality)."[103] Barthes's mid-life crisis is accompanied by a difficult *acedy*, a state of gloom and stagnation that "repetitive work and mourning" dispose one to, and hence his desire to explore a different genre of writing, the novel, as he is bored to death with the monotonous task of writing lectures. Barthes' attempt to explicate the mid-life crisis provokes some unanswered questions: can it occur more than once in a lifetime if it is not a mere mathematical point? And if so, does each reinvention of the mid-life lead to an obliteration of the last?

If the opening lines of Dante's *Inferno* evoke the mid-life thematically, its rhythmic manifestation can be located in the lyric sonnet's volta: a particularly definitive turn and backward glance that alters the future course of the argument, a gesture that takes place outside of time as a double movement forward and backward. Peter Szendy illustrates the function of the volta anecdotally with the figure of Orpheus as he leads Eurydice from the

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[102] *Ibid*., 4.

[103] *Ibid*., 5.

underworld. The volta is represented as the very moment Orpheus turns around and loses Eurydice forever; the possibility of recuperating his love from death is definitively ended.[104] This is comparable to the theory of the mid-life turn given by Barthes in his third hypothesis: a fatal rupture, a radical break in time and a realization of one's mortality.

Caroline Bergvall's "Via": Surface Intensities, Transmission, and the Unfathomable Depths of a Language

Nel mezzo dei cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
che la diritta via era smarrita

The Divine Comedy- Pt.1 Inferno - Canto 1- (1-3)

1. Along the journey of our life half way
I found myself again in a dark wood
wherein the straight road no longer lay.
(Dale, 1996)

2. At the midpoint in the journey of our life
I found myself astray in a dark wood
For the straight path had vanished.
(Creagh and Hollander, 1989)

3. HALF over the wayfaring of our life,

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[104] Peter Szendy, *Sur Écoute. Esthétique de l'espionnage* (Paris : Les Éditions de Minuit, 2007), 83.

Since missed the right way, through a night-dark wood
Struggling, I found myself.
(Musgrave, 1893)

4. Halfway along the road we have to go,
I found myself obscured in a great Forest,
Bewildered, and I knew I had lost the way.
(Sisson, 1980)

5. Halfway along the journey of our life
I woke in wonder in a sunless wood
For I had wandered from the narrow way
(Zappulla, 1998)

6. HALFWAY on our life's journey, in a wood,
From the right path I found myself astray.
(Heaney, 1993)

7. Halfway through our trek in life
I found myself in this dark wood,
miles away from the right road.
(Ellis, 1994)

8. Half-way upon the journey of our life,
I found myself within a gloomy wood,
By reason that the path direct was lost.
(Pollock, 1854)[105]

[105] Caroline Bergvall, "Via," In *Fig* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2005), 67.

In Caroline Bergvall's "Via," the paratextual threshold element of the alphabetical index is displaced from its habitual position as supplement to the text, functioning instead as that which supplies order and form, subtly fixing the shape of the work. "Via" is not a supplemental paratext or index to another work. To group lines of poetry according to the sequence of alphabetic letters means to combine common sounds: sets of tenuously affirming affinities and dissonances along which intensities are transmitted beyond the usual sonic pleasures of assonance and consonance.

With the displacement of the alphabetical index in Bergvall's "Via," what is commonly understood to be a paratextual element is repurposed as poetic form. Here, the alphabetical index serves to supply the text with a predictable and neutral structure. The extrinsic *informational* form of "Via" operates as a randomizing force, independently of any authorial intention.

To complicate matters further, Bergvall, an artist working across many disciplines, languages and media, does not place "the book" or "the page" at the center of her practice. Indeed, "Via" was an oral performance before it ever appeared in print. In Bergvall's practice, the book is generally displaced from the centre of literary production, itself given the status of paratext. Bergvall has been performing and producing audio, video and textual installation work since the 1990s, most recently with *Drift* (2015), a multimedia text installation work about the perils of maritime migration, which also circulates in book (print) form. Similarly, "Via" is a highly mediated text or set of texts that has circulated and continues to circulate via multiple modes of media. The procedure by which the final text is formed is a systemic operation of liminal poetics, a poetics that complicates rather than explicates, collecting

multiple possible thresholds of meaning and enacting these via multiple forms of transmission.

In the pages that follow, I examine some of the notions about genre and translation that Bergvall undermines through her adoption of the alphabetical index to structure a literary work, as well as the possibilities opened by an enactment of queer strategies of parody and appropriation, in this case of the medieval lyric voice. I propose that "Via" is an affectively-charged poetic experiment. Each of the following three sections provides a discrete reading of Bergvall's poem/archive. Reading the texts on these different levels reveals the extent to which Bergvall defamiliarizes our expectations about poetic form and what constitutes a typical material support for a literary work: book, MP3 or otherwise. "Via," an entirely literary text, is also a highly mediated work, and one that is aware of its own mediation.

Via(s): Media and Translation

In order to write clearly of "Via," it is important to address the initial confusion created by the fact that this title may refer simultaneously to a number of different objects: a live performance, an audio recording that circulates in MP3 format, a written text that circulates in codex format, and another written text that was published in a print journal but that circulates primarily in portable document format. In each case, the conditions of reception are entirely different: whether visual or auditory, in public or at home, live or mediated by speakers, on the screen or on the page. Therefore, there is no possibility of writing of a singular, purely textual phenomenon that is "Via." To simplify matters for the purpose of this discussion, I will use the term "work" instead of "text" where I mean to refer to Bergvall's oral performance of "Via" rather than to a written record of that performance; to further clarify, I do not mean to suggest

a universal, all-inclusive idea of a "work" that precedes the text, and that stands as a source for all forms of mediation Bergvall has explored or could explore. Rather, I use these terms here, work and text, only to distinguish orality from writing, according to an understanding whereby the oral performance of "Via" includes the text, because the text is part of the performance. Therefore, borrowing a distinction outlined by Paul Zumthor, I will write of the "work" when I wish to speak of the orally performed text and the "text" when I refer to the poem on the page:

> [L]'oeuvre embrasse la totalité des éléments de la performance ; le texte est la séquence linguistique auditivement perçue. Le texte est l'une des composantes de l'oeuvre ; l'oeuvre n'existe pas sans le texte ; mais elle n'existerait pas non plus sans ses autres composantes. [the work comprises all of the elements of performance; the text is the linguistic sequence perceived auditively. The text is one of the components of the work; the work does not exist without the text; but nor would it exist without its other components.[106]

I should further clarify that my discussion of the oral performance, or the work, will refer more specifically to an edited audio recording of Bergvall reading "Via" rather than an embodied, live performance. This audio recording circulates in MP3 format, which I have downloaded to my private computer, saved to my personal desktop, and listened to in my private home. Although I have thus imperfectly appropriated Zumthor's definition of work and text, by which he means to distinguish the live, oral performance of poetry from its written record, I have found the general distinction it sets up between orality and writing in relation to poetry to be useful for the purpose of the following discussion.

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[106] Paul Zumthor, "Oralité – un inédit de Paul Zumthor," *Intermédialités* 12 (Automne 2008): 196.

An unstable and shifting relationship between orality and writing informs my reading of "Via" on many levels. On the one hand, "Via" is a textual collection that is arranged alphabetically, and the alphabet is a product of writing; on the other hand, "Via"'s primary mode of circulation has been through digital audio format, an MP3 available online, a recorded oral performance. Furthermore, in terms of content, the source on which Bergvall draws/plays is Dante's *Inferno*, composed in the 13th century, when the spaces between words that enabled silent reading had at the time only very recently been introduced to Italian codices, constituting another historical moment of transition between orality and writing, where their related functions were shifting and slippery.[107] Rather than posit a historical narrative that sees orality gradually as having gradually given way to silent reading, however, Peter Middleton, a scholar whose area of research is the oral poetry reading, has argued for the ongoing relevance of oral poetry, to the present day, by suggesting that written and oral poetry could be seen to operate in a historically continuous economy of interdependence:

> Silent reading and reading aloud have been part of a single economy of reading throughout history. The difficulty for poets wanting to extend the poetics of orality has been that the shift from oral to written culture is usually portrayed as a gradual, irreversible change from reading aloud to silent reading, one that happened gradually over centuries until its completion in the Renaissance, and eventually led to the utter ascendancy of print at least four centuries ago. It is a history with no place for the poetic virtues of orality, which assumes that such change is inevitable since silent reading is wholly preferable to the cumbersome demands of reading aloud to a group, and only took so long to develop because of illiteracy, the scarcity of texts, and a general lack of privacy. Recently there

[107] See Paul Saenger, *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1997) 237 - 242.

> have been signs that historians of writing and reading are finding evidence that supports the idea that orality and literacy are much more interdependent than has hitherto been supposed, and poets have become less inclined to polarize orality and literacy in such value-laden terms.[108]

While little has been written about the oral poetry performance, even less has been written about the new digital forms of its capture and circulation. Martin Spinelli suggests that critics need a new taxonomy to theorize digitally captured and edited oral poetry:

> We need, at this point, to develop a new taxonomy, a new vocabulary for our speech editing, one that considers the characteristics of our technology, that considers the ability of listeners to approach material with a variety of interpretive strategies, and finally one that recognizes that today's listeners are media savvy — they do not assume they are listening to a 'real' or 'natural' audio event but to something that is always already highly processed and produced.[109]

"Via" is not only a highly mediated text at the level of transmission (it has circulated and continues to circulate via multiple modes of media), it is also a text that archives, in a sense, a history of transmission that is dependent on translation, the history by which Dante's work was brought into English for different reasons at different times, and according to the

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[108] Peter Middleton, "The Contemporary Poetry Reading," In *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, Ed. Charles Bernstein (New York, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 273.

[109] Martin Spinelli, "Analog Echoes: A Poetics of Digital Audio Editing" *Object* 10 (Winter, 2002) http://www.ubu.com/papers/object/06_spinelli.pdf.

translators' varied aesthetic preferences, the political climate in which the translator worked, etc.; each instance of translation is always contingent. Bergvall is comfortable working across media, but also across languages: she is a writer with a Norwegian-French background but who lives and works in England, someone for whom the specific texture of a language is never inherently given, predetermined or absolute. In the multilingual text, languages resonate at their limits with other languages, languages both living and dead, languages sounding through each other and inside each other and informing the present. It is fitting that the English of Bergvall's "Via" spans the English of the Romantic poets to the present: as such, it is not one English, not a transparent, universal or imperial English. The multilingual position is one that recognizes the multiplicity inherent within languages and well as between them. One of the problems of translation in America is, as Lawrence Venuti has argued, that the translator slips into invisibility in the popular mind, so that the translated text is taken up as though it conveyed the "author's" words, as though, for example, when I read a translation of Dante in English, I am reading the words of "Dante." However, in translation not only are the words, literally, changed, but any idea expressed with different words changes and constitutes a new idea. By this tendency to gloss over the specific context in which a work of literature circulates, the culture from which it arises (one that may be entirely outside America) is obviated, in a gesture that encompasses all the heedlessness of imperialist thought. The English idea of Dante's *Inferno* is highly mediated in terms of translation and transmission, as the sheer number of translations available shows. "Via" is a text that archives, in a sense, a vast history of transmission.

Composed entirely of extant English translations of the first stanza of Dante's *La Divina Commedia*, Bergvall's "Via" is as much a collection of poetry as a poetic work in its

own right. More specifically, the text of ”Via” is an alphabetically ordered archive of all the extant English translations of the opening stanza of Dante’s *Inferno*, which the author has scrupulously copied and arranged. In this case, the “author” Bergvall’s role in creation is modeled on that of the copyist rather than inventor. Her task as an author is to perform a procedure that enacts temporal and spatial constraints: specifically, to copy all the extant translations of the first tercet of the Inferno that she can find in the British Library up until the year 2 000, that is, 700 years after the poem’s original publication. In the process, as “errors” creep in through transcription, she fastidiously returns to the source texts as a copyeditor to double-check her work for accuracy, in the process repositioning the translations as *source texts*: as originals to be exonerated and perfectly captured. Her performance of reading and transcription writing recalls the archaic figure of the medieval amanuensis, yet the media through which her captured oral text will be transmitted are not just the codex but also contemporary and digital media, including the common MP3. Her composition procedure and materials are deeply literary, distinguishing her work from much of the interdisciplinary writing that tends to be classified as conceptual writing; yet Bergvall’s attention to media of transmission and her resultant interdisciplinary performances, along with the constraints according to which she designs her performance, do render her work compatible with conceptual movement. Like the conceptual writers, Bergvall performs “writing” in a manner that radically opposes Romantic notions of self-expression. This is accomplished by the imposition of constraints that limit (or appear to limit, at least) the writer’s intervention in the process of creating the work. In “Via,” the only interventions “the author” Bergvall makes in the composition of this text are choices related to 1) the overall form of the work, 2) the title and 3) the medium in which it circulates. Via’s “content,” however, is not authored by

Bergvall; instead, it has already been generated, in this case by 47 different translators over time, and as such her work is a sutured polyphonic text. Only the choices listed above are authored by Bergvall. It is the performance of process, rather, with all its contingent constraints and choices, that bears her signature. However, as discussed in the following sections, Bergvall's "Via" also pushes up against the limits of what is frequently understood, celebrated and dismissed as conceptual writing.

Abandoning the Straight Path

With "Via," Bergvall's play with transcription and translation authorizes the copy or the shadow of the original as the original. It is a performance that displaces and reinscribes a translation as an original, calling into question the notion of true and categorical origins. In the process of creating "Via," Bergvall repositions the translations as source texts (against which she checks her copies for accuracy) rather than imperfect replicas of an inimitable original. In the process, Via is not located within a paradigm of linear reproduction: Bergvall emphasizes the phenomenon of the multiple rather than returning to a singular, ulterior source. If we were to consider the Italian lines of verse as the sole, true, singular or unadulterated original informing her process, we could see Bergvall's work as the product of a double displacement, where the original is first displaced through the act of translation and then through the act of transcription. Yet, because there is no singular or true source text, it is a displacement without any singular point of origin. The attention Bergvall gives to reproducing the names of the translators renders them visible and audible in lieu of the original author, a mechanism that further extends authority to the translators. Finally, in the print-based version of "Via" in *Fig*,

the original Italian stanza appears at the top of the page (the title word "Via" is excerpted from the third line: *che la dirrita via era smarrita*). Translation never produces an exact copy; the Italian tercet is most accurately approximated in another language through the accumulation and absorption of multiple translations. In this repetition and variation of sources and beginnings, "Via" suggests there is no sole and unique origin, on the one hand. On the other hand, paradoxically, if a singular translation effaces the difference of the original, a multiplicity of translations, paradoxically, begins to render the origin visible. This multiplicity of translations defamiliarizes the common trope of translation as reproduction by returning us to the materiality of language as difference.

"Via" is a text that begins repeatedly, and as such, one that sanctions an excess of thresholds. Its compositional principle is repetition and variation, constrained to repeating the essence of the opening lines of Dante's epic. In "Via," we are offered the epic beginning: *in media res*, as the speaker is already walking, but instead of progressing in narratological time, the story simply begins again and again with the incipit.

> Along the journey of our life half way…
>
> In the midpoint in the journey of our life…
>
> HALF OVER the wayfaring of our life…
>
> Half way along the road we have to go…

Its texture fluctuates rather than changes. Variations produce a liminal space of reiterated openings, each not exactly like what has gone before. The stanza, in addition to functioning as a beginning, is an affective threshold, one that can be perceived slightly

differently at different times, in different light, in differing moods. This is the work of translation, which is always contingent and variable. Dante's journey starts not at the beginning of life, but rather in "mid-life," at which point the speaker is "lost" in a dark wood. Like any fairytale beginning, the dark wood conjures panic, distress and certain foreboding.

…Wherein the straight road no longer lay (Dale, 1996)

…For the straight path had vanished (Creagh and Hollander, 1989)

…Struggling, I found myself (Musgrave, 1893)

…Bewildered, and I knew I had lost the way (Sisson, 1980)

This formulaic narrative device for beginning is reiterated repeatedly, compounding panic. Furthermore, the eerie repetition of this testimony to being "lost," of having lost "the straight path" evokes a narrative in which the speaker remains located in an original sense of wilderness, the repeated and incomplete gesture, its numerous iterations that vary across time. Regardless of the lack of forward movement, the straight path, the right way, *la dirrita via* is already impossible at the outset. The sense of being lost, to which the speaker attests, contrasts with the simple severity of alphabetical order imposed by the archival form, by the organizational apparatus of the bibliographic finding aid. In *Via*, we find ourselves caught by the tension between chaos and order, between the imposition of institutional classification and form and fear of the wilderness, the imperiled state of the unknown, for the woods are dark.

The choice of the alphabetical index as structural device can also be interpreted as a framework that resists a totalizing interpretation. The alphabetically ordered list of first tercets offers no greater, enveloping concept according to which the poem may be understood or read

(such as may have been had the author had chosen to order the translations chronologically or according to translator's name). In "Via," an elemental incongruity is produced by the insertion of proper names, of which there are two distinct types to be discussed: the title of the work and the names of the translators. The title, as I stated earlier, is the only "original" writing Bergvall has made in the composition of the text. The title, "Via," appears as a sandy shoal, an element of the text partially submerged in the original Italian (a word in the third line of the tercet) and obscured nearly completely in the flood of English translations. The simple title renders the textual system in its entirety finally perceptible if not total: it means 'by way of' and implies a route without a definitive beginning and end, but it also points conceptually to the problematics of transmission, the network of media (the intermedial formats in which Bergvall's work circulates) and of translations. "Via" points to the notion of passage. At the junctions between tercets, the names of the translators are uttered, not conclusively, but as sonic bridges that conduct the listener to the next instance of beginning, in succession. Each proper name is located on an axis perpendicular to the tercets, acting as an understated stop to the prolonged ambient minimalism created by the repetition and subtle variation of translation, and the assonance and alliteration produced by the alphabetical constraint.

The form of the poem does not provide an analogy in relation to which the poem may be read. Instead it functions as a neat, minimalist grid that secures a collection of textual objects: a collection that is complete only insofar as the constraints of the author's process dictate, but which bears no pretence to universal completion. That is, the collection's parameters are a function of temporal and spatial constraints (all the translations available in the British Library in a specific seven hundred year period).

Transmission of Affect and the Conceptual Writing Movement

Poetry is generally seen to produce "feeling" when it can be construed as a display of self-expression, typically embodied by the lyric mode. For a number of reasons, however, avant-garde poetry has endorsed the rejection of the lyric mode in favour of other models, recently exemplified by the "conceptual writing" movement, which has as one of its main advocates an American performer and scholar, Kenneth Goldsmith (or perhaps it would be more accurate to use the past tense, since conceptual writing was already declared dead by Johanna Drucker in 2012). About the place of emotion in the conceptual writing movement, Goldsmith writes: "It is the objective of the author who is concerned with conceptual writing to make her work mentally interesting to the reader, and therefore usually she would want it to become emotionally dry."[110] The Cartesian binary conjured by this statement, the equation of the "mentally interesting" with "emotionally dry" is based on the generally accepted understanding that emotion is married to a Romantic aesthetic of self-expression, or that emotion dulls the intellect and is an obstacle to work that is intellectually interesting. Further to Goldsmith, Drucker, in her article on the death of the conceptual writing movement (published in The St. Mark's Poetry Project newsletter in 2012) suggests that conceptual writing is "stripped of affect":

> Read aloud, much conceptualism might as well be automated text-to-voice samplings of contemporary language across a spectrum from banal to more banal. Flattened, ordinary,

[110] Goldsmith, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Writing."

> stripped of affect, the text-generating machines of its formulae do not compose as much as produce a text. Some conceptual writing is downright boring. Some is exceptional, even poignantly, richly humanistic, not mechanistic in the least.[111]

What is at stake in suggesting that writing can be isolated from emotion and in putting forward a binary framework for conceptual writing in which intellect is opposed to emotion and championed over it? Does this entail an inadvertent rejection of thirty years of feminist endeavours to extend epistemic credibility to feeling subjects of any gender? There is something incredibly unsettling about any claim to depleted feeling or to feelinglessness, regardless of the degree of artifice involved in the process of making. Further, it is questionable whether a prescribed feelinglessness can be claimed for both for the producer and the receiver of the work: as though they necessarily share the same feeling. Although I am not a proponent of Romantic self-expression, the "conceptual writing" I find intellectually engaging is not "emotionally dry." I would suggest that there are other ways in which feeling is integral to the experiences of making and reception that can be explored in "Via," in particular through the strategies of lyric appropriation and aural variation. Pleasure itself is an affect that cannot be apportioned in part to the intellect and in part to the emotional.

In response to Goldsmith, I propose to characterize Caroline Bergvall's "Via" as "emotionally wet" conceptual writing. Sara Ahmed, putting aside the term "emotion" with all its problematic relations to Romantic notions of inner feeling and individual ownership, argues for the term "affect" instead, in order to theorize the political work of passions or intensities

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[111] Johanna Drucker, "Beyond Conceptualism: Poetics after Critique and the Individual Voice." *Poetry Project Newsletter* (May 2012).

(affects) that *circulate* and stick to objects rather than belong to them. Affects can attach themselves to people or objects or even to other affects, but they do no permanently reside in any given subject or object. Affects do not originate with a subject to be transmitted to another subject. Therefore, an affect of reception might be entirely separate from an affect of production, meaning that it would be remiss to summarize the affect produced by "Via" in terms of the author's subjectivity and feeling in the process of composition and compilation. The fact of the matter is that the text of "Via" has no "author" but rather a multitude of authors whose work Bergvall has collected and performed. In the process, Bergvall does not express her feelings, but clearly affect can still be transmitted, in part by the lyric content, which repeats and varies like a minimalist composition. There is, however, certainly the suggestion of a linguistic subject, an *I*, in the repetition of the English pronoun, even if no *one* author has composed the work. Furthermore, in the audio recording, Bergvall and her collaborator, composer Ciarán Maher, do add her voice's fractals to the mix of translators' voices:

> In the summer 2000, a reading of the variations was made by Ciarán. Using calculations set up via his software, he unearthed an added line, an imperceptible grain, my voice's fractals, and we let it run, hardly audible, underneath the structure of the reading voice, inextricably tied to it, yet escaping it, releasing from it a surprising beauty, magnified shrapnel of interior sound. The 48th variation.[112]

Recording the polyphonic text, Bergvall adds a translation of her voice in a nearly imperceptible way: not as a semantic *I* but as a barely audible sound that accompanies the other translators.

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[112] Bergvall, *Fig*, 64.

Clearly, Dante's *I* is not the speaker of Bergvall's work: "as we enter the world of 'Via' we are no longer following Dante on his journey to find Beatrice, we are tracing the mood and predicament of a new speaker."[113] In addition I wish to clarify that in Bergvall's text of "Via", we have already left Dante's *I* behind in translation (the *I* implied by the Italian verb: *mi ritrovai* — because, of course, there is literally no *I* in the Italian tercet). Furthermore, in the performance of the work, we must take the addition of Bergvall's voice — literally, the sound of her voice — as primary. As Genevieve Kaplan points out, a mood is created via the introduction of this new speaker. This speaker (i.e., all the ghostly translators' voices as performed by Bergvall) seems to suffer the repeated trauma of utter loss, in successive variations. Not only is a sombre mood thus established, but an irrepressible and ambient affect, one of alternating devastation and ambivalence, of proximity and distance. The dark wood, after all, is the terrible beginning of any devastating fairytale. The sombre affect is a function of both the sonic register, as well as the semantic register whereby the lyric *I* produces its narratives, drawing on accepted mythologies. Even though the author (i.e. Bergvall) has not created the lyric *I* through standard means of self expression — the textual *I* is not the voice of the author, even though the spoken *I* is — an affect is attached to the lyric literary mode that survives all the laminates of reproduction. Haunting and echoing, Dante's mid-life crisis is transmitted across distressed fractal surfaces.

Although Bergvall works with constraints in "Via," her literary method is influenced as

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[113] Genevieve Kaplan, "How we read Caroline Bergvall's 'Via' and Why we should care," *Jacket* 38 (2009), accessed May 2, 2015, http://jacketmagazine.com/38/bergvall-by kaplan.html.

much by feminism as Oulipo, and therefore does not involve the author's outright rejection of subjectivity but rather the subversive appropriation another lyric voice, in this case that of Dante — or, more accurately, his translators. In the foreword to an anthology of "conceptual writing by women," which she co-edited, Bergvall lists the following characteristics as criteria defining the work collected in the book: "the main point of commonality is that the pieces included here all share an acute awareness of the literarity of literature, of the paratextuality of the book, of the technologies of writing, of the examination of the poetic function."[114] As much as Bergvall's work can be placed within a text art tradition (especially her installation works), her method and materials are deeply engaged with literary questions in a way that a lot of text art is not. Appropriation of voice, in a post-punk feminist literary tradition, following Kathy Acker, is certainly one of Bergvall's strategies in "Via;" in fact, Kathy Acker (or even more playfully, "Kathy Acker via Don Quixote") appears in the list of translators appended to the first print version of "Via," in *Chain.* In this version, 48 English variations appear, unlike the printed text in *Fig*, where there are only 47 (Acker has been removed). This playful insertion of Acker's intertextual transmission of Dante (via Quixote) says much about the literarity of Bergvall's conceptual methods; the insertion of the work and name of a writer Bergvall has been influenced by is a personal gesture that stands out from the constraints of accuracy structuring the work.

Unlike the definition offered by Drucker, where conceptual writing consists of "automated text-to-voice samplings of contemporary language across a spectrum from banal

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[114] Caroline Bergvall. "The Conceptual Twist: A Forward." (*I'll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing By Women*, Eds. Bergvall et al., Los Angeles: Les Figues Press, 2012), 20.

to more banal," Bergvall's textual samplings do not coincide in time and are not contemporary (although the media of transmission are new). Perhaps what renders "Via" an "emotionally wet" conceptual work is its multi-temporal appropriation of lyric, according to which innumerably minute variations and possibilities and the unfathomable depths of a language appears. In the process of language acquisition, the new speaker would find herself astray in an expansive dark wood that is language itself.

*

Would of the Dark Wood

Throughout this discussion, I have drawn attention to the affective intensities produced by Bergvall's collection of translations, particularly in relation to the textual form and oral transmission of "Via." At stake in Bergvall's unique poetic interventions are a series of broader questions for the poetics of the conditional threshold, marked by the question of desire and volition, where it is always obscure (in the dark wood). Bergvall's "Via" resists simple categorization by coming into being at different moments not as a single text but as a work encompassing more than one performance, more than one text, more than one media. Bergvall's "Via" also challenges the assumed division between writing and archiving. At once a seemingly perfectly executed example of conceptual writing, Bergvall's "Via" also challenges assumptions about the place of affect in experimental or conceptual writing. However rigid Bergvall's adopted structure — the alphabetic index — may be, its rigidity by no means obfuscates the questions that have persisted throughout the history of poetry and poetics. It is a work and a text that demonstrate that the infinite iterability of new media does not preclude poetic tension and affective intensity.

I opened this chapter with a call for a "third approach" in contemporary poetics — one that represents a slippage from the dilemma posed by the overwhelming opposition of content to form. In essence, I opened with a call for a threshold poetics — a poetics that lives on the threshold of form but one that is not necessarily devoid of content. This is a poetics that does not assume — as contemporary conceptual poetry does — that residing on the outer limits of poetic form necessarily rests upon the divestment of content and affect. From Zukofsky, Halsey and Poyet's indexes, which are all differently located as paratextual elements, to Bergvall's archive of recovered translations of Dante, one discovers a threshold poetics that resists the very binary structure upon which certain schools of experimental poetry have sought to define themselves against lyrical forms.

Chapter Three

One More Word: Translation and The Politics of Neutrality

Da orixe nada sei, non creo que poidamos ter acceso a algo así como a orixe, a orixe é sempre un relato, unha ficción. A escena é sobradamente coñecida: alguén se dirixe a un grupo e lles relata a orixe (unha identidade) e a partir de aí configurase unhas formas que exclúen a quen non escoita ou non acata o relato. Pero ao tempo que isto sucede, sucede tamén que outra palabra comeza, esoutra palabra cando se profire ou se escribe fai tremer o Estado. A escena é tamén moi sabida: esa palabra pon de manifesto que o gobernante é incestuoso, en consecuencia é expulsado da cidade, a súa muller afórcase, os seus fillos comezan unha guerra civil etc. Por suposto os desenlaces poden ser outros. Entendo que esa palabra é a palabra do poema.

[Of origin, I know nothing; I don't believe we can access anything like origin; origin is always a story, a fiction. The scene is only too familiar: someone rules a group and tells them their origin (an identity) and from this, forms are configured that exclude all who don't listen to or submit to the story. At the same time, something else goes on; another word commences, when this other word is proffered and written down, it makes the State tremble. This scene is also well known: this word makes clear that the governor is incestuous, and in consequence he's expelled from the city, his wife hangs herself, his sons foment civil war, etc. Of course there may be other outcomes. To my mind, that word is the word of the poem.]

— Chus Pato, English translation by Erin Moure

Introduction: The Problem of Neutrality in Translation Theory

Recently, at a poetry reading event in New York, a writer whose work I am unfamiliar with, whose book had just been published in a bilingual, French-English edition (she was an Anglophone-American living in Paris), presented a young woman who was to join her and read with her from what she called 'The French,' presumably in an alternating bilingual reading of her new book. This should have delighted me, as do generally the rare opportunities to listen to French-language poetry in New York; however, this particular phrase, 'The French,' sounded problematically vague to me. If I hadn't been so keen on maintaining a polite demeanor, I might have interrupted on the spot and interjected, "Is the French text a translation? And, did you write it yourself?" As a translator, I am exceedingly aware that there is never a simple, transparent equivalence to an English-language text, but only multiple possibilities contingent on choices made by translators, who are also writers — but here the poet had neglected to name the writer of the French-language text and seemed to be passing it off as her own. Furthermore, as someone who learned to speak French in Québec, it is absolutely clear to me there is no one universal 'French,' in the same way that Anglophones in North America no longer defer to the Queen's English. Thus, concentric elisions of difference presented themselves to me — in this case, differences that were stifled by not one but competing imperialisms.

While the omission of the translator's name at this event might be seen by some to be nothing more than a small oversight, it is, in fact, symptomatic of a significant cultural blind-spot. It points beyond a small poetry gathering to a more general situation of enduring injustice that is manifested in specific acts of cultural appropriation, absorption and

exploitation. In the field of translation, it adopts several forms. First of all, cultural appropriation arises from the misconceived notion that an 'original' text and its translation should exist in a relationship of fluid transparency — as was implied by the omission of the translator's name at the poetry reading, as though the translated text, the authorless 'French,' were a mere replica of the English-language text. When this happens in the reverse — i.e. when English is the translating language — the fallacy of transparency supports the absorption of a foreign text into English, consuming it in such a way as to erase its cultural specificity. This process entails a desire to represent the Other in a normalizing language such as it is *already commonly used* — in other words, a desire to reproduce or create a replica of the foreign text in a language usage so familiar that it draws no attention to itself. Such a translating language bears no residue of the source language, as it erases all marks of foreignness. Finally, the failure to recognize the translator's work as subjective writing — an omission caused in part by the pervasive worship of the author function as that which subsumes all labor — renders the translator invisible, a relentlessly exploited producer, even as the translator performs an essential role of introducing new audiences to new ideas and ideas to new contexts.

Addressing these problems, Lawrence Venuti, in his seminal work *The Translator's Invisibility*, considers two contrasting approaches to translation, the first of which he describes as a process of domestication and the second as foreignization. In the first case, a text is absorbed into the translating language according to an illusion of fluency and thereby 'domesticated' by the translating language as its cultural specificity is erased in the process of translation and book production. Domestication is the result of a desire for slick *readability* and *linguistic transparency* that afflicts the book market in general:

> The prevalence of fluid domestication has supported these developments [of an aggressively monolingual culture in the USA and the UK] because of its economic value: enforced by editors, publishers and reviewers, fluency results in translations that are eminently readable and therefore consumable on the book market, assisting in their commodification and insuring the neglect of foreign texts and English-language translation strategies that are more resistant to easy readability.[115]

The discursive effect of transparency, Venuti argues, also results in a situation of exploitation that causes translators to suffer as unrecognized, underpaid producers of essential work. The translator, in effect, disappears in the easy readability of his or her work, according to an idea of fluency that is premised on a false illusion of equivalency between two texts and two languages, an illusion that facilitates consumption. The translator's invisibility is symptomatic first of all of monolingual ignorance regarding the process of translation itself, a false supposition that meaning can simply be repeated from one language to another, or that all languages are essentially the same, and that every language has the potential to say the same thing as any other. On the contrary, because the production of meaning is a contextual effect of relationships occurring along a semantic chain, meaning cannot be repeated or reproduced in another language along what is, in effect, a completely different signifying chain, which is why there is no simple equivalence that would constitute a true semantic repetition, and further, why transparency is a fallacy. As noted, the fact that the translator suffers marginalization is additionally indicative of general labour inequities in the capitalist book

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[115] Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 12.

market where the author-function (who may or may not have actually written the work) takes all. But most importantly, the translator's invisibility is the product of a general incapacity for registering cultural difference, a failure to acknowledge the presence of the Other that entails an erasure of the Other, a fundamental problem pervasive across hegemonic Anglophone cultures.

To resist this trend toward domestication, Venuti suggests alternative translation methods, which he describes in terms of 'foreignization:' any method that draws attention to the fact the work has been translated, and also tries to create a field of visibility for the Other.[116] The translator can adopt resistant, foreignizing tactics either through their choice of text to be translated or through the process of translation itself. First, by choosing to translate a non-canonical work, the translator enacts one possible tactic of foreignization, where the translation is not easily absorbed into the consumer market since the author-function does not yet exist in the translating language. Second, the translator might use a discursive strategy in the process of translation to convey the foreignness of the text. Anything that renders the translating language strange would represent a tactic of foreignization that is by definition resistant to domestication.

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[116] In *The Task of the Translator*, Benjamin argues that easy readability in the translating language is not a sign of a meritorious translation. "It is not the highest praise of a translation… to say that it reads as if it had been originally written in that language." Indeed, Benjamin makes a plea for literal translation ("if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, the literalness is the arcade…"). Walter Benjamin, "The "Task of the Translator," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections.* Ed. Hannah Arendt, Trans. Harry Zorn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 79. Literal translation would constitute a foreignizing strategy, as it transforms the translating language.

These two approaches offered by Venuti — that of domestication versus that of foreignization — can be seen to elaborate on a distinction made by Friedrich Schleiermacher in *On the Different Methods of Translating* originally published in 1813. Here, Schleiermacher famously asserts that there are two methods of translation: in the first case, the translator brings the writer to the reader and "leaves the reader alone" and in the second, the translator brings the reader to the writer and "leaves the writer alone."[117] Venuti's method of foreignization would thus describe an approach that makes the reader travel to the writer and enter unfamiliar territory, as opposed to domestication, which would entail altering the foreign to make it easily legible to the reader, by making the writer travel.

Ideally, however, any translation process would entail a compromise between the two movements identified by Schleiermacher. The reader and the writer would meet mid-way, at a point that does not really exist, and that is neither here nor there. This third place might be a trembling of being, impossible to locate, a site of experience and a medium that has vanished from the scene. Or it might be, in an analogy given by Paul Ricoeur, that non-existent but hypothetical "third text" that can be used to measure both the text of departure and the text of

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[117] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On the Different Methods of Translating*, 42. Further, consider Benjamin's assertion that a translation should no more think of the reader in its composition than a work of literature should: "whenever a translation undertakes to serve the reader" the result will be an "inferior translation." Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 70. The intention of the translation should not be to serve the reader because no literary work should ever have this aim. To associate such an intention with the translation of work would thereby render it incompatible with the intentions of the source text, which it seeks to honor.

arrival, since the two cannot be measured simply against each other.[118] The third text, thus, is neither here nor there, but corresponds to both positions. Paul Ricoeur posits the third term as something that exists beyond but in dialogue with the two real texts in question (the translation and the original). In *Sur la traduction*, Ricoeur writes:

> Le dilemme est le suivant : les deux textes de départ et d'arrivée devraient, dans une bonne traduction, être mesurés par un troisième texte inexistant. Le problème, c'est en effet de dire la même chose ou de prétendre dire la même chose de deux façons différentes. Mais ce même, cet identique n'est donné nulle part à la façon d'un tiers texte dont le statut serait celui du troisième homme dans le *Parménide* de Platon, tiers entre l'idée de l'homme et les échantillons humains supposés participer à l'idée vraie et réelle. À défaut de ce texte tiers, où résiderait le sens même, l'identique sémantique, il n'y a pour seul recours que la lecture critique de quelques spécialistes sinon polyglottes du moins bilingue [….][119]

Additionally, we might consider such a third text as a living organism, a text vibrating with the life material of both languages and the comprehension of both in the body of the translator. The "mid-point" for these purposes is neither temporal, as is the mid-life point that

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[118] The text of 'departure' is an alternative terminology for the more commonly used 'source' text or 'original' text. Erin Moure rejects the metaphor of shooting ('target,' 'source') implied by the English terms, favouring instead the Galician trope of the voyage ('departure,' 'arrival') as a metaphor for translation. She writes, "[…] translation for me is not a task in which we seek equivalents for words, in which we try to tame the source language by making something readily recognizable in the target language. Something accommodating. My tactic is to listen to the *text of departure*, and let the text speak." (Moure, *My Beloved Wager*, 246).

[119] Ricoeur, *Sur la traduction*, 14.

I discussed in Chapter 2, nor spatial. Instead it is ontological, for it returns us to the trembling of being that is translation, where the translator, who commences with the act of translation, simultaneously becomes an absent figure, one who can read across both texts at once, the ideal reader of a translation. Across these movements of varying degrees, translation is an expression of transportation, a journey that is not predictable from the outset, even if one might have a general idea of a route in mind. If the translator facilitates transmission, the medium of inscription is not a site of reception of neutral transmission; rather, transmission is an issuance that incompletely inscribes the vitality of the translator within the vitality of language.

Undermining the vital event of inscription is the problem of neutrality, a belief that language can be translated with transparency. "*En premier exemple, disons que serait neutre celui qui n'intervient pas dans ce qu'il dit*," Blanchot writes in his analysis of the neutral.[120] Not leaving a personal trace on what one has written: this is the claim of objective neutrality, an illusion the translator is urged to maintain as one who cannot or should not announce his or her own presence in what she has written, who will not intervene in what he or she says; nor will the foreign language impede the fluid functioning of the reader's language. Such assumptions of neutrality are imperative for the paradigm of translational fidelity to continue to produce its impossible desire for an irrecoverable origin and its counterpart: its translation, a counterfeit. The assumption of neutrality leads to the notion of transparency in Blanchot's analysis (where the neutral is a feature of transparency), as the opacity of transparency;

[120] Blanchot, *L'entretien infini*, 447. In Blanchot's French, the word *neutre* is a homonym that refers to either the neutral (as in this cited phrase) or to the neuter.

neutrality produces the fundamental impenetrability of transparency, paradoxically, at the very basis of transparency.

Counterfeits and Creations

While foreign texts and their translations are often misrepresented as simple semantic equivalents, the notion of equivalence does not extend to value, where there remains a strict hierarchy of values between the 'original' text and the translation (as was indicated by the omission of the translator's name at the poetry reading). The economy of loss that is seen to govern translation centers on the impossibility of equivalence between an original and a reproduction: a copy that is always in some measure inauthentic, a counterfeit. According to this economy of loss, any translation is doomed to inferiority and failure from the outset, a shadow or a fake, for it can never repeat the original to which it is bound. In the case of poetry in translation, displacement occurs doubly, along both semantic and rhythmic axes, conjuring a heightened sense of absence in the reader who receives the text in the economy of loss. This point is emphasized by Abdelfattah Kilito, in an essay where he critiques Jâhiz' (776-868) interdiction against the translation of poetry:

> Revenons au parallèle établi par Jâhiz dans le *Livre des animaux* entre philosophie grecque et poésie arabe. Nous en déduisons que la philosophie est susceptible de traduction, alors que la poésie y est réfractaire. Traduire Platon et Aristote peut se faire

> sans perte notable ; mais traduire la poésie, qui est avant tout une forme, ne peut donner qu'un résultat médiocre.[121]

Translation is burdened from the beginning by its perceived attachment to an unrecoverable loss: the reading of the translated poem is a melancholic reading, a longing for the impossible originary text, a longing that is impossible because the full presence of meaning was always absent even in the original reading. Therefore translation is doubly burdened by a longing for what is an impossibly complete meaning, even prior to any comparison elicited by the difference between languages. Already, the reading of any translated poem is weighted down by a general, anticipatory nostalgia for something that was never, in fact, in reach of the reader. This melancholic tendency finds its expression in the view that translation necessarily depletes poetry — robs it of its apparent essence — and as a result, in a conviction that the translation, and the poet-translator by extension, is a mere thief or vandal who brings nothing but damage to the poem.

How might it be possible to consider translation in different terms, however, moving away from the notion of a linear path that extends from an original to its reproduction and the concomitant economy of loss? On the one hand, we might consider a translation as a beginning in its own right, a newly conceived text or poem, rather than sheer technical repetition: a commencement, emerging from the remnants of material that is no-longer and not-yet language as we know it. In *Lavish Absence: Recalling and Rereading Edmond Jabès,* Rosemarie Waldrop describes how, early in the translation process "the finished work is

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[121] Abdelfattah Kilito, *Tu ne parleras pas ma langue,* Trans. Francis Gouin (Arles: Actes Sud, 2008), 50.

dissolved back into a state of fluidity, of potential." From the process of destruction, of ruination, the glowing material of translation emerges.[122] Constructed from raw material, from the point of another beginning, translation is never a direct derivation from another work. Further, in an essay called *Irreducible Strangeness*, Waldrop deconstructs the narrative of simple linearity that typically supports the view of the translation as derivative:

> Curiously, the philosopher and critic Wilhelm Dilthey saw the hermeneutic process exactly in these terms, as "uncovering the meaning of a text by re-creating the whole process of the genesis of that text." The conceptual premise behind it is Aristotle's distinction between *ergon* and *energeia*: interpretation of a work, as Dilthey understands it, consists in "translating the *ergon* — the completed object — back into the *energeia* that brought it forth.[123]

If translation is a process of creation rather than simple repetition, clearly its circuitous beginnings unfold multitudes. In these terms, we might conceive of any translation as one text among multiple texts emerging from the singular process of translation, which is not a direct, linear path to a 'shadow,' a correct copy. If the translator's body is a third text, a translation can be seen as one possible document of its vitality. Just as there are always multiple accounts of historical events, no single document can be subject to scrutiny as representative of the whole truth of the translational event, which is contingent on the present view of history that

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[122] Waldrop also cites a metaphor from Haroldo de Campos, where the translation process is matter of "dissolving the Apollonian crystallization of the original text back into a state of molten lava."

[123] Rosemarie Waldrop, *Dissonance (if you are interested)* (Tuscaloosa: Univeristy of Alabama Press, 2005), 158.

already occurs as an intersection between a subject and an incidental view of the past. Such a relationship of contingency and dependency must be understood to inform any translational endeavour. On the threshold of contingency, the translated text is an inscription of a performance, a trace of an event, a "record of an encounter," such as Norma Cole describes. In her words:

> The translation never takes place since the texts have nothing in common. The words are all different.
>
> Leap of faith.
>
> Transcendence or encounter.
>
> A record of the encounter.[124]

If a translation is a "record of the encounter," as Cole suggests, it documents an instance, a concurrence and a convergence, and as such, transmits an experience otherwise embodied by the third text in absentia. In this view, translation is complicated as a notion beyond the dull standards of mere technical procedure based on locating and executing equivalencies — as an exchange that happens in some mechanistic or formulaic way — and is reconceived as that which enacts the encounter and demonstrates difference.

If we consider translation thus as an encounter that is captured and transmitted as a textual record, how might the marks of its own doubleness (or even multiplicity) be inscribed in such a document? This is a problem that extends beyond Venuti's strategies of

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[124] Norma Cole, *To be at Music: Essays and Talks* (Richmond, CA: Omnidawn Books, 2010).

foreignization that show the variegated surface of the translating language as difference. In the end, the ghostly third text tends to endure only as a notable absence from a scene of reading that does not proclaim its passage as translation: as an irreconcilable absence. How might its presence be signalled? As a form of disruption caused by the translator's hand? Is it possible to capture an impression of the translator's mid-way grasp across two languages?

In this chapter, I argue that one such challenge to the problem of the absent third text can be found in a work published in 2014, *Secession with Insecession*, by Erin Moure and Chus Pato. In this book, translator Erin Moure archives the encounter of translation by inserting a third text that is, at once, both a personal memoir and a reflection on the text of departure. Laid-out on facing pages opposite her translation of Chus Pato's *Secession,* Moure's own memoir, *Insecession,* emerges as not only a creative work, but also as a document of the encounter of translation. Inscribed within the translation *Secession*, *Insecession* can be read as expressing yet another degree of translation or at least as an expansion of the great range of translational possibilities. Moure's text renders the translator's presence not only visible but as an inevitable and vital force to be reckoned with.

To counter the invisibility of the encounter of translation and thus the disappearance of the translated text is a matter of resistance. To resist and to counter: to meet in contradistinction, to brush up against another, registering difference. "The translation never takes place since the texts have nothing in common," suggests Cole — a statement that reminds us that translation, if it is understood as an exchange of equivalencies and as repetition, is impossible. This notion is re-affirmed in an essay by Moure:

> Though I am a translator, I always affirm that translation is impossible. This appears to be but is not an unsustainable situation. It is, rather, creative. Always between two

> languages there is a river to cross and the river has orelas – banks – just as our bodies have orellas – ears. The river too is a body that listens. Made, like our body, of water. And between two languages … there are rios or perhaps rias – wide inlets – or even a sea to traverse. There is no linear relationship between languages.[125]

Eloquently described here, Moure's conjecture that translation is a creative, not merely imitative task — a point of view she has referred to elsewhere as trans*e*lation or "transcreation" — counters the depleted paradigm of translation by positioning the translator as an actor: an agent whose texts, reconceived as creations, can counteract the conditions of their exploitation beyond the tiresome and impossible demands of fidelity to a master text. This process arrives at a performative mid-point, inscribing a text that pivots and swirls among countless beginnings, and registers its vitality as a countersignature. The translator's authority turns the signature away from a mark of authenticity and towards multiplicity, for it is never one thing alone. It is an authority that can count its words once recorded but not its future, for it is a vitality that refuses to settle into monotonous predictability.

An Encounter Between Two Poets: Affinities

Moure's archive of the translation process and memoir inscribed in *Insecession,* both structurally and thematically informed by the poet-translator's encounter with the text of departure, is also a product of the enduring literary friendship between Erin Moure and Chus Pato and therefore of numerous previous encounters across different texts and in time. The

[125] Erin Moure, *My Beloved Wager* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2014), 245.

original encounter between these two poets took place many years ago: in a Galician bookstore, where Moure purchased a book by Chus Pato when she was just beginning to learn the Galician language Galego. Thus, Moure's original introduction to Pato was as a reader:

> On March 20, 2001, I was in Andel bookstore in Vigo with my friend (and first Galician teacher), writer and translator María Reimóndez, buying dictionaries and simple books to help me learn more Galician. After paying and before turning to leave, I saw on the counter a large book with an incredible knobbly cover, bright orange, bearing the inscription: *m-Talá*, and below that, the words *Chus Pato*.
>
> I had no idea what it was, or what those three words meant. But I could tell it was a special artifact. It was a book that refused the standards of book marketing, that made itself into a stunning object, that gave you no image of what you would find inside, that absolutely refused to interpret the book for you in advance.[126]

Of the three words that Moure could not understand, two of them were the name of the author, words that would eventually come to represent for Moure the writer, Chus Pato, an acquaintance whose work she would accompany as a translator and friend. But initially the words posed an absolute abyss of referentiality, the author name as impenetrable as the untranslatable title. Since undertaking to translate this first 'impossible' book, Moure has translated several works by Chus Pato into English.[127] *Secession* is her fourth book-length Pato translation, following *Charenton* (2007), *m-Talá* (2009) and *Hordes of Writing* (2011).

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[126] Erin Moure, *My Beloved Wager*, 249.

[127] Moure's friend María Reimóndez warned her that translating Chus Pato's m-Tala would be impossible. (*ibid.*, 250). Elsewhere, in an interview, Moure discusses this point further: "'Impossible'

There are a number of notable affinities between the two poets, including their experimentalism, feminism, and prominence as relative national poets of their generation. They share "similar, wary, hopeful, discordant poetic sensibilities," as Moure herself writes in the introduction to *m-Talá*, a wariness and 'discord' that unsettles accepted lyrical clichés, all the while affirming poetry's ethical commitment to dialogue (which necessitates hope), mediation, a desire for change and respect for the Other. Both have been described as radical expermentalists, admired for the risks they take politically and with poetic language. And both live and work within socio-political contexts of nationalism, sovereignty movements and minority language activism.[128]

Although both Moure and Pato were born in 1955, they were born into very different landscapes: Pato came of age in Galicia under the fascist government of Franco-era Spain, while Moure was born and raised in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Pato's formative years unfolded in an official state culture that disallowed the public usage of Galician, a resilient language and a culture that nevertheless survived, despite the odds. From *Charenton* (the first published translation of Pato by Moure), where a utopian vision of national sovereignty arises among the fragmented dialogue of a post-revolutionary madhouse, to *Secession*, it is evident

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is what people said when I wanted to translate Chus Pato. Translation is often called impossible. In fact, I am most often attracted to translating 'impossible' texts, texts that are not served well by the worn paradigms of translation based on a contrast between fidelity to the word (much more than this goes into translation, and in different ways than the paradigm supposes) and transparency or fluidity of the text in the target language." ("An Autobiography of Translation," *Montreal Review of Books,* Summer 2014).

[128] Moure has lived in Québec for over thirty years; Pato was born and raised in Galicia.

that political resistance is a major impetus and focus of Pato's writing, and that for Pato, poetry itself is a force of resistance. Wary of the unrelenting effects of capitalism on an unrecognized national community that is melancholy for its origins, Pato has been said to question "the pressures that urban cultures put on rural ones and warns against the unforeseen consequences that global capitalism and Empire may have for traditional communities that have not yet experienced national consolidation."[129] While this dichotomy might be understood to locate Pato's politics within a territorial national paradigm based on geographical boundaries and tensions, Pato's idea of the 'motherland' is not of a singular natural territory. Galicia, a semi-autonomous nation with no state, complicates notions of sovereignty and the idea of 'natural' territory, as a result of the nomadic dispersion the Galician community, and the presence of its stateless emigrant communities outside of Europe. As Maria do Cebreiro writes, Pato relies on Deleuze's concept of the horde (notably, she builds on this concept explicitly in *Hordes of Writing*) and the notion of 'immanent territoriality' based on movement rather than permanence. Therefore, do Cebreiro explains, "the poet places herself closer to an immanent territoriality — as defined by Deleuze and Guatarri in *A Thousand Plateaus* — than to an identitary essentialism." This position is confirmed by the epigraph cited at the beginning of this chapter. There, Pato aligns the notion of origin with identity, both representing a fiction that cannot be accessed in reality but that bears the power to harm. To reiterate: "The scene is only too familiar: someone rules a group and tells them their origin (an identity) and from this, forms are configured that exclude all

[129] José María Rodríguez Garcia, "Yolanda Castanño: Fashionista and Floating Poet, *Discourse*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Winter 2011): 105-106.

who don't listen to or submit to the story."[130] Identitary essentialism is an ideology that risks supporting abuses of power on the part of the state apparatus, as it is co-opted by the sovereign to create conditions of exclusion that only serve to fortify its power.[131]

When identity is co-opted by the state, negations of its conditions can function to exclude certain persons from the possibility of belonging. The notion of exclusion, according to Giorgio Agamben, is at the heart of Western political thought extending to Aristotle, where life is divided in terms of natural life (*zoe*) and political life (*bios*), according to which distinctions certain humans may or may not participate in political life, in democratic, public debate. How does Agamben's notion of *bios* inform a reading of *Secession*? In a note at the beginning of the book, Pato's *Secession* is described as a *biopoetics*. What sort of relationship between political life and poetics is suggested by this term, and, more specifically, how does the lyrical *I* participate in political life through the writing of biopoetics? Beyond the simple mirror of self-expression and beyond lyric poetry's aporia of representation, biopoetics explicitly places the lyrical subject, the *I*, in relation to the political field. The *I* in *Secession* is not that of the poet relating an autobiography or expressing interior reflections; rather, the *I* issues from the poem itself, is the utterance of the poem, and also that of its future community, the polis. This requires a reconsideration of the figure of the lyric *I*, starting with the very first poem in *Secession*, which alludes to a work, *La Chair des mots: Politique de l'écriture,* by Jacques Rancière, which discusses this exact topic: the political function of the modern, revolutionary poetic lyric. Here, Rancière locates the modern lyric subject's emergence in the

[130] Chus Pato, Interview with Geneviève Robichaud, Trans. Erin Moure.

Romantic period (not antiquity, although the Romantics' view of lyrical antiquity was made in their own image) as a vector of revolutionary freedom, a subject authorized to depart and speak freely by the utopic, communal "we" of the future nation-state. Importantly, in the figure of the modern lyric subject, Rancière does not see an expression of internal conflict or personal reflection; the lyric mode instead is characterized as one of "accompaniment" between the community of the sensible and the *I*: "la révolution lyrique moderne n'est pas une manière de s'expérimenter soi-même, d'éprouver la profondeur de sa vie intérieure ou à l'inverse de l'abîmer dans la profondeur de la nature."[132] Instead, Rancière argues, the lyric *I is coextensive with what is said*, which coextensivity he articulates as a mode of "accompaniment," where the *I* is not defined in terms of what it represents or hides. That is, the life of the *I* in *Secession* is political and participatory and the word of this *I* of biopoetics is a revolutionary utterance.

On the other side, we have the sparks of origin, embers, warmly glowing on the shore of the translation, where the imagery of the politicized lyrical *I* connects to the sensible community. For example, on page 70 and 71, facing pages, the reader finds two accounts of a funeral, one Pato's (as translated by Moure) and one Moure's. On the right hand side, we read about the burial of the grandfather, Manolo of Almorfe, in Galicia, a narrative of accreted layers of generations of hardship and political suffering. On the left page, we read a narrative from the translator, Moure describing a funeral she went to with her father in Ottawa, which leads eventually to the fortuitous discovery of documents confirming the Galician identity of her own grandfather. Moure's text is addressed to Pato, comprising a personal stake in both

[132] Jacques Rancière, *La Chair des mots : Politiques de l'écriture* (Éditions Galilée, 1998), 20.

the revolutionary poetics of Pato's that she translates. The translator's text, direct in its confession of intentions and desire for the Galician language, builds on a series of affinities between the experience of one and the other. This economy of desire is not one of loss. Across the page, both sensible and metaphorical affinities that lead the reader into several locations at once, the figurative unifications of a series of dislocations. "Dearest Cambria: Yesterday we buried Manolo of Almorfe, we wandered lost down the highway until we found the funeral home:" thus commences the Pato text, while on the facing text, Moure's begins: "Dearest Chus, the only funeral I ever attended on my father's side was my Uncle Dick's in Canada's capital."[133] Here is a history of nomadic migration, there of the frayed nets of belonging. The translator transports the reader doubly by casting a figurative frame around the translation — a frame that also functions referentially, even as if delineates a field — a second, exterior mode of figuration. Comparison, figuration, metaphor: these are the modes of reading suggested by the literalization of the third text (one that is situated somewhere between or beyond the translation and its source) and the complicated lyrical *I* that emerges as a political subjective utterance in Pato's biopoetics and a doubled coextensivity of the lyrical *I* in Moure's "echolocation." If translation is a matter of bringing across, the reading of translation should be a matter of reading across, of reading as a vector and a transport.

Yet, between the Moure text and the Pato (via Moure) text, the complex series of comparison along nodes of affinity do not bear on a greater unity. Rather, the parts rub against each other, not locking together, neither adhering nor repulsing the other from within. We might even say that Moure's correspondent text, operating at times in the confessional mode,

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[133] Pato and Moure, *Secession with Insecession*, (Toronto : BookThug, 2014), 70-71.

as memoir, produces an excessive subjectivity, that it exceeds containment, that it spills onto the facing translation, affects, infects or transforms it. In this case, the third text, which allows the reader to *read across,* operates in a figurative mode that bears most resemblance to the allegorical. Its disruptions, further, fragment the text and the reading of the text. Most importantly, such fragmentation is at the heart of the figurative incompleteness that characterizes any poetic practice. As a way of reading translation, "reading across" thus thrums with the vitality of the third text and the performance of the translator's bodily presence, now the very medium of the field of the sensible.

The revolutionary lyrical *I,* the poetic *I* authorized by the community of the sensible to speak of and from the political sphere, is essential to the testimony of the oppressed, for both Moure and Pato. This discordant production of lyric is the most important point of affinity between these poets.

The Count and the Signature: One More Word

While certain affinities might be located in the minority-language politics and independent-nationalist yearnings of Chus Pato's Galicia and Erin Moure's Québec, or the nationalism of Erin Moure's Canada for that matter, in *Secession/Insecession*, nationalism informs the work not so much as a thematic affinity but rather as the structuring device of the book itself, shaping its production by necessitating the third text as a matter of policy. As noted previously, this is Moure's fourth translation of Pato's work — three previous books were jointly published in the United Kingdom by Shearsman and in Canada by Bushekbooks. With *Secession*, Moure sought a Canadian literary publisher, with the knowledge, however, that a Canadian publisher would face funding restrictions if they chose to publish her translation

from a foreign language, because the national arts council, the Canada Arts Council, does not support literary translation of works by foreign authors.[134] Since most literary and academic presses depend heavily on government subsidies, there is naturally a great reluctance among publishers to publish unfunded books.

In fact, in 2005, Erin Moure and Robert Majzels campaigned to change this policy. Appealing to Canadian writers, intellectuals and artists, they circulated a petition for extending national arts council support to publications of translations of foreign-authored words. As a plea for the vitality of Canadian literature, their manifesto critiques a prevalent form of national insularity to redress the potential situation of cultural isolation such policy limitations propagate. Concluding their appeal, Moure and Majzels address specific policy points by enumerating solutions. The first of their demands, which was not achieved, is pertinent to an understanding of the policy that inadvertently shaped *Secession/Insecession*, a policy that its "third text" counters:

> Canadian literary publishers should be allowed to use a set proportion of their block grants (funding without which it is impossible to publish a literary book in Canada,

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[134] Languages supported under the arts council translation grants are French, English and Aboriginal languages; further, the original works must have a Canadian author. National publishing, largely supported by the Canada Council for the Arts, originated as a protectionist nationalist endeavor and is by definition invested in representing national culture. This has been its mandate since it was founded in the wake of World War II, during a period when "arts funding was connected rhetorically to the collective search for cultural sovereignty and national independence" as well as to the need for solidifying national defense. (Berland 24) At this time, the 1951 Massey Report surmised the nation's need to invest in the Arts along the following lines: "it has been suggested to us that one measure of the degree of civilization attained by a nation might fairly be the extent to which the nation's creative artists are supported, encouraged and esteemed by the nation as a whole" (Massey Report, 182).

> especially books that open up practices apart from the mainstream) to publish the work of Canadians translating from languages other than English and French, and from works of literatures outside Canada by writers who are not Canadians. This major change can be accomplished without any cost to the Council, and with great benefit to the literature.[135]

Since such a change was never realized, the publication of Moure's fourth Chus Pato book translation, *Secession*, necessitated a subversion of the mandate so as to render the work eligible for funding. In this case, because a poetry publisher can publish a book by a Canadian poet as long as the author is Canadian and their work accounts for *more* than 50% of the book, Moure chose to write a second text in parallel to Chus Pato's *Secession* and in the process of doing so, ensure that the word count of her text was at least one word greater than Pato's text: one additional word would enable Moure's text to qualify as sufficiently Canadian and thus as eligible for arts council funding. As a result, the 'encounter' of translation would be made explicit because of the imperative to count the words of Moure's contribution and to quantify her contribution as a qualifying national poet. Here, the author's signature would depend on the word-count of her text, a count that would determine the work's authenticity, quantify it as sufficiently Canadian in content.

By creating a new genre, in effect — a hybrid text that is just under one half translation, the other half personal memoir — she was able to incorporate a translation of a foreign work into the official publishing market and to circumvent the arts council's criteria.

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[135] This proposal was originally circulated in an email from Erin Moure and Robert Majzels to a group of Canadian writers in December 2005.

The final poem in the book, titled "48, or 49," sardonically begins, "I still owe 48 words + 1," an allusion to the necessity for her part of the book to be greater than 50% of the total content. "48, or 49" represents an excess of ironically quantifiable Canadian subjectivity required to justify the book's publication. In the process of translating and writing *Secession/Insecession*, however, Moure did more than subvert a nationalist and protectionist funding structure — she created a text that utterly resists categorization.

In the case of *Secession/Insecession*, Moure, as both translator and author within the same book, renders visible the encounter between the translator and the text in question, and along with that, the material that is most often lost, what she calls the 'intranslatable' material. The third text, however, is more than a simple metanarrative on the process of translating Pato's book.

The first problem this double book poses to the reader is where to start and how to read it? On the left hand side of the page, one reads Moure's memoir as a series of responses to and anticipations of ideas elaborated on the opposite page, in Chus Pato's text. Both are lyrical memoir projects that neither situate nor conceal the place of the translator and poet as subjects in a socio-political landscape. In the lyrical mode, which neither announces the *I* as representative of the poet nor presents it as a fictional construct, the precepts of direct representation are subverted, and neither is time linear nor place fixed. Further, it may happen that Moure's text anticipates an image from Pato's at one point; at another, the translator's memoir is prompted by images from the translated text and responds to them. In this way, the notion of origin again is elided: the source text is not posited in a singular linear relationship with the translation; it is not an 'original' text, but, in Moure's words, a 'departure' text — a point of departure, of beginning. Of this process — *in secession* — Moure writes: "Translation

(the poetry of Chus Pato) is a way of bringing — into the secession or cut — another voice, a human voice, markings in words from a culture across a far border, to mark these words (her words) into new ears and onto new bodies, just under new skin."[136] The secession is a cut in which the potential of language shimmers under the figurative new skin of the translator's body — that is, as third text and as medium of transmission. It is a cut that appears before the text, and then as the potentially different text that separates the text of the translator and author.

The cut of 'secession' also evokes a physical wound: a bodily wound where there is bleeding but also where boundaries between inside and outside blur, such as on the indefinite frontier of the potentially abject state. If in Pato's *Secession*, we encounter the subject positioned as a member of a nation desiring secession from Spain, while in Moure's *Insecession*, we encounter the translator whose positioning is identified within the conditions of secession, where the translator grapples with representing the sovereignty of the narrator in the context of the received sovereignty of the translator's voice. The cut opens a liminal zone of the voice where it is ambiguous where or even whether one thing begins and another ends. Similarly, in the double structure of *Secession/Insecession*, a potentiality emerges in the elusive cut between these interlocking texts written from overlapping subject positions, a text that points to the experience of the translator on one side and the author on the other, where the translator's text reverberates with that she has translated. Between these two, finally and definitively, we are confronted with a more literal cut: the simple gutter of the page, where all potential presents itself as a crossing, and which the reader's gaze must eventually traverse.

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[136] Pato and Moure, *Secession…*, 144.

The Ruin and the Scaffolding

In *Secession*'s final poem, "Ruin," "the voice" — a dislocated and perambulatory haunting — "is interested in figuring out the difference between remnant and fragment."[137] This lyrical 'voice' might be singular or travel in a horde, but in either case it inhabits the ruins of the text as a ghostly voice. The 'voice' places the artifact and the remnant on a continuum with memory. First, the remnants of human lives the poet sees at Auschwitz provoke a reflection that hope for humanity, although devastated, may not have been totally destroyed. The poet, faced with the shocking artifacts of the brutality of conditions of bare life at Auschwitz, at their unspeakable horror, calls the death camp museum "dark lightning, a perfect oxymoron."[138] Here the remnant distinguishes itself from the fragment because it points from death into collective memory.

The remnant — i.e. material that is captured, that endures in time—might share with the fragment a pretense of pointing to a destroyed totality, yet the remnant itself by definition has resisted destruction; it persists as that which remains. In its persistence, it insists on the presence of the real. Further, the remnant points beyond the singular individual (an integrity) and into the collective memory, while the fragment speaks primarily to conditions of integrity.

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[137] Pato and Moure, *Secession…*, 167.

[138] *Ibid.*, 65. "In this way, we are all vestiges, remnants of the humanity that was destroyed in us, but not totally: not the suitcases, the orthopedics, the shoes, the eyeglasses. All we write are traces of a literally razed poetry…"

While both the remnant and the fragment participate in the logic of synecdoche, the part that indexes an unstated or unrecoverable whole, they differ in terms of their indexical modality. The remnant, a piece of the real, seeks to position itself in time (even as the past might escape history), whereas the fragment, by contrast, is defined primarily as a part detached from a whole and in this sense, it is detached from time and the political implications of history and narratives of power as well. The fragment is not defined in terms of temporality or remembrance except insofar as it may be a detachment from a notion of whole time, and in this interpretation it can be read as an aspect of the destruction of time's 'grand narrative.' Still, the existence of the fragment does not necessarily imply the passage of time or any endurance, unlike the remnant, which thus comes to represent the memorable aspect of ruins, since the primary definition of ruins is "the state or condition of downfall or collapse."[139] We might further conjecture that the movement of the ruin-remnant is a downward motion while the movement of the whole-fragment is a lateral motion, if indeed there is any motion implied at all in the breakage that constitutes the fragment. The ruin collapses toward the earth, decaying with the forces of natural history, and resisting such narratives of natural history with its indestructible hauntings of collective memory.

Further, the placement of the poem "Ruins" at the end of *Secession*, a self-referential gesture that suggests a *mise-en-abyme* of the poetry book itself, contracts the poetic word into a variously signifying wellspring for the memory of language and its poiesis. As Pato (via translator Moure) writes:

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[139] *Oxford English Dictionary*, *s.v.* "ruin."

> a poem is a conjunction of ruins, but these ruins are the drives of the language; they belong to imagination and from there emit their signals, which desire writing—these ruins are really us navigating birth and emerging into life—
>
> thus a poem is not composed of fragments but of ruins that are remainders of an earlier collapse or of one still to come, or that never happened, that are ghosts and despite this memorable.[140]

Here, the poetic word takes the place of that which cannot write because it is crumbling. The ruin's active capacity derives from its place within collective memory, where it is not merely the site or embodiment of memory but the means and materials of remembrance itself: "these ruins are really us." In Pato's metaphor, where language is cast as emerging from ruins, the poet's language figuratively animates the ruin and resurfaces it from any sinking narrative of passive decay. Since languages are inherently impervious, if not more resistant, to the forces of gravity than buildings, Pato's metaphor supplants the narrative of linear collapse with the ruin-language's dynamism and contingency on human vitality, the ghosting lyrical voice, nonetheless memorable despite its ghostliness.

Since the poem "Ruins" suggests the book's mise-en-abyme as the ruins of poetry (and, doubly, of Pato/Moure's poetry book in particular), it points us back into the book, reframing our reception, recasting our vision of *Secession*'s poetry as textual architecture. Just as Walter Benjamin saw in the ruin the emergent matter of memory in the production of allegorical thought, the ghosts from Pato's ruins can be found haunting the pages of Moure's memoir, either as translational vapours or as the building stones of poems or finally as the

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[140] Pato and Moure, *Secession*, 169.

cobblestones of the revolution that undo the narrative of progress and endurance proper to history. In this sense, it is as though a pattern of flames were already imprinted in the grain of the wood that burns, the pattern of fire already archived in the wood that burns. The translational ruin is ablaze with its imagery that leaps from the allegorical grain of thought, from the text of departure where its metaphorical tracks (of transport) are emblazoned in its heart.

If it has been noted previously that any translation should be conceived as a translation of fragments, might it be more precise, in this case, to cast the task of lyrical translation as a *translation of ruins*—ruins implying as they do the collapsed remains of something in time? If indeed the poem is not composed of fragments but of ruins that are remainders of an earlier collapse or of one still to come, then the translator of poetry erects a transmedial scaffolding spanning the surface and its gaps. Perhaps, then, it's no coincidence that on the cover of Moure's book there's an image — on the inner surface, sheet metal, and on the outer, wooden scaffolding and in between a bird's nest. Here, we have represented, the closed and the open, the thing made and the thing that is being built — the voice that is impossible to climb, that is inaccessible, and the voice that provides a scaffolding. Scaffolding as the voice of the translator — something one might climb, skeletal perhaps, but something of the transmedian that it is possible to grasp nevertheless. And in between the two, the rough structure of a nest, of beginning, and the potential of flight.

The location of the lyrical voice, either in motion and nomadic among a horde of voices, or temporarily installed along scaffolding, is always shown against its potential dislocation, as a comparative phenomenon: almost somewhere it is not, almost something it is not, an I that is both like and unlike another I. The lyric as prompting metaphorical, allegorical

or figurative reading, evades representation of either a group or an individual in terms of identitary essentialism. The metaphorical text represents only its own constant changing and thus continual comparison: "and they are metaphor because they are dislocation, praxis that unites what is dislocated."[141]

The structure of *Secession/Insecession*, referred to by Barbour as a 'double helix,' is based on conditions of metaphor.[142] It confronts the reader with his or her resistance to looking across the gutter to the other side, to traverse the cut. To read this book means to engage in a process of comparison on several levels, to read across in anticipation of similarities between Moure's text and her translation of Pato's text, and within the lyric for its metaphors, fragments, proximities, ruins. On the one hand, either text can be seen to function as an abstraction of a text given its dislocation from an 'original,' in which case the process of comparison dissolves into a incommeasurability of abstractions. Instead, a unification occurs through praxis, on the threshold of points of affinity, from one text to another, points scattered as unpredictably as by the wind, even then as vegetation that creeps up and along the ruins of representation.

Because the ruin exists in time, it is never monotonous, as monotony is atemporal. Instead, it signifies slow change and collapse. Rather than monotony, the ruin exists on the axis of melancholy. This takes the form of a longing for a lost communal past (the rural

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[141] *Ibid.*, 169.

[142] Douglas Barbour. "Chus Patos with Erin Moure: An Incredible ongoing conversation continues." https://eclecticruckus.wordpress.com/2014/06/06/chus-pato-with-erin-moure-an-incredible-ongoing-conversation-continues-in-secessioninsecession/

farming life of the ancestors), as the ghosts of past generations live on, in a clamor of melancholy. Yet, under what conditions might the nation cease to be melancholic if its very identity as a nation has yet to be acknowledged?

> Yes, as I tell you, the war never ended, identity crumbled from us bit by bit. The ruins? It took us a long time to see them, the whole country was crumbling around us, houses, I already told you so. Bombings no, dear, there were no bombings: the bombs were invisible
> time-bombs[143]

Identity can be seen to function either as a monotonous manifestation of repetition or as a melancholic longing for an originary attribute of bindingness such as has been rendered invisible or unknowable. Identity might be determined by the sovereign to produce conformity or it can represent an oppressed or submerged experience of difference, such as in the case of melancholy. In either case, identity is formed by the power of the law, even as a state of emergency is declared which represents the sovereign's absolute power, not an anarchic suspension of law. This is the problem of identity, which Pato raises in the interview epigraphed at the beginning of this chapter, and which points to a constellation of considerations. For one, how to avoid the pithy constructs of identity that any politic of nationalism might risk abusing? Secondly, is it possible to conceive of nationalism beyond the aporia of sovereignty, of a national community beyond the very politics of statehood that disempower that community, that even threat to render it unthinkable? And, finally, what is

[143] *Ibid.*, 107.

the place of writing, of poetry, outside the 'fold,' outside the 'flag,' in relation to the national community?

For Agamben in *The Coming Community*, the "singularity" allows for an alternative production of community and therefore of the notion of belonging: that of the community-to-come. The singularity can only be understood as that which it is (which it is coming to be) — it cannot be ascribed properties that are the conventional conditions of belonging:

> Dans celle-ci l'être-quel est repris dans son appartenance à telle ou telle propriété, qui indentifie comme membre de tel ou tel ensemble, de telle ou telle classe- (les rouges les francais les musulmans) et il est repris non par rapport à une autre classe ou à la simple absence générique de toute appartenance mais relativement à son être à l'appartenance même.[144]

For Agamben, belonging itself and not the conditions of belonging (identity-based essences or properties that yield sets based on similarity and difference) will form the community-to-come. Agamben's project, therefore, is to present a new ontological order, based on the singularity in lieu of the set, and proximity, in order to undo the political problem of the state of exception: in other words, to undo the logic of sovereignty, because "sovereignty and the law that fill all space available to them are nihilist." Thus, Pato writes of the urgency "to violate the state of permanent emergency that oppresses us. To exist beyond sovereignty," which also entails a reconsideration of the subject's constitution as sovereign subject to a

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[144] Giorgio Agamben, *La communauté qui vient: Théorie de la singularité quelconque*, Trans. Marilène Raiola (*Multitudes: Revue politique, artistique, philosophique.* Printemps, 1990), n.p.

subject-hood of proximity and relation.[145] In *The Coming Community*, since constituent power is never free of constituted power, Agamben reconsiders political theory in terms of ontological potentiality, relocating the subject from the politics of power to the possibility of a politics of ontology, through which a political theory free from the "aporia of sovereignty" might be conceived.

Earlier in this chapter, the observation was made, following Blanchot, that undermining the vital event of inscription is the problem of neutrality: the supposition that language can be translated with transparency and that the invisible translator does not intervene in what she writes. In the process, a voice is elected to cross the border, a body is discovered and lost, the performance of the cut sealed and absorbed, a gutter traversed without declaration or resistance. If the lyrical *I* by definition challenges the sovereignty of the subject and voice, then its translation does so exponentially. In the first place, the *I* is neither the voice of the poet nor the representation of a sovereign subject; in the second, the *I* is neither the voice of the poet, nor of the translator, nor the representation of a sovereign subject. The translator's encounter is more permanent and less indifferent, more than a matter of word-counts, fidelity and authenticity against which the signature of the author is compared. Indeed, the translator's encounter does leave its residue on the glass of authenticity, another signature, a third text, a shiver in the surface of the neutral.

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[145] Pato and Moure, *Secession…*, 157.

The Intelligibility of the Outside

The problem of literary translation, as Walter Benjamin has argued, is that it fails when it tries to render a literary text more easily readable in the translating language than it was in the original, given that easy readability has never been a defining feature of literary production. "If it [the translation] were intended for the reader, the same would have to apply to the original. If the original does not exist for the reader's sake, how could the translation be understood on the basis of this premise?"[146] Any attempt to reproduce the literary work in language such as it is already commonly used, language so familiar that it draws no attention to itself but is absorbed runs counter to the gestures of literary creation and the emergence of literary language in general. Proust once made the charming claim that "beautiful books are written in a sort of foreign language," a point of view that Deleuze takes up in his essay on the stutter, "Bégaya-t-il…" where he theorizes the 'foreignization' that occurs in the language of the literary text to begin with, because the writer is a stranger to his or her own language, a foreigner of the inside.[147]

What is the nature of such a foreign language within a language, without a people, a nation or a country? How does a text invent its unique language? Deleuze explores this concept via the stutter, which serves as an example of a type of anomalous language usage and rhythmic difference. To illustrate what it means to write this stutter, Deleuze contrasts two

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[146] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections,* ed. Hannah Arendt and trans. Harry Zorn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 70.

[147] Deleuze, *Critique et Clinique (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit)*, 135-143.

common approaches fiction writer might take to represent a character's stutter in writing. In the first case, like Balzac does in *Eugene Grandet*, the writer can demonstrate a character's stuttering speech by laying out each syllable, as it sounds, in writing. In the second case, the writer can simply refer to the stutter summarily by indicating "she stuttered," for example, and thus leave it to the reader's imagination to produce the stutter in question. Deleuze then offers a third, but radically different way of thinking about the stutter in literature. In this case, moving away from the specific case of spoken language to the case of language itself, Deleuze asks, what if language itself stutters? " Ce n'est plus le personage qui est bègue de parole, c'est l'écrivain qui devient bègue de la langue."[148] Such a stutter would happen when language is pushed to its limits and arises as an intersection of tensions. In this way all literature emerges from great tension as a stutter in language, when the limits of language are pushed according to lines of variation that twist and turn away from normative syntactical usage and bend grammar to its limits. Thus, Deleuze explains, the language of a particular work of literature is born like a foreign language within a given language to constitute a sort of minor language or, rather, a minor language usage within a major language.

Despite his use of the term "minor language" in the essay on the stutter, which would normally suggest a comparison between languages (and which such comparison is developed in "Qu'est-ce qu'une littérature mineure?"), here Deleuze is clear to separate this notion of a minor language from the case of bilingualism or multilingualism. Instead, he argues that a work of literature is unique as its language partakes in a unique expression, which is therefore unrepeatable, even if, as a stutter, it emerges as a convulsion of repetitions itself. Such a

[148] *Ibid.*, 135.

"minor" language does not belong to a social group or even to an individual (again, it is not a matter of comparing languages); rather, 'minor' language connotes a unique usage of a language that constitutes the material of a singular literary work. It does not draw on something outside itself; instead it emerges as a unique variation within a language. Further, we should add that any translation must do this too — emerge as a foreign language or a stutter within a given language.

> Les deux aspect s'effectuent suivant une infinite de tonalités, mais toujours ensemble: une limite du langage qui tend toute la langue, une ligne de variation ou de modulation tendue qui porte la langue à cette limite. Et de meme que la nouvelle langue n'est pas exérieure à la langue, la limite asyntaxique n'est pas extérieure au langage: elle est *le dehors* du langage, non pas au-dehors.[149]

Deleuze' emphasis on the outside, indicated by his use of italics, subtly points to the notion of the foreign as meshed within rather than purely outside. The foreign is within the one or the primary position. It crystallizes along its surface. The new language is an external surface, a materialization in the abyss of language, a spontaneous growth or crystallization that appears out of the common substance of language. If this new, externalized language had an opposite, that would properly be purely internal, and purely transparent, the stuff of the cliché.

The cliché is a transparent surface without depth, pure surface. It only becomes visible when the *dehors* crystallizes along it. This surface can be appropriated and put to use in different contexts but only in some will the surface reflect a luster and engage attention, a

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[149] *Ibid.,* 141.

flash of luminosity that troubles its transparency in ripples. This luster might appear with changing contexts, but it is only the shine of monotony, of cliché and repetition.

CONCLUSION

In an essay titled, "Philosophy and Music," Theodor Adorno reminds us that in order to investigate the condition of music, philosophy first has to ask the question, *What is music?* However, any attempt to categorize art is a gesture that art, by its very definition, defies. Adorno goes on to suggest, somewhat paradoxically, that the "raison d'être of all art is to reject the raison d'être, that is to say the justification of its own existence."[150] In this way, art resists attempts to legitimate it, name it, to capture it, to know its ephemeral shape. As art escapes our grasp, its elusive gesture exceeds our capacity for naming and disrupts our epistemological frames. And yet, despite this disruption, we know and recognize art without any observation of a manifest category that would define it as such. One recognizes art just as it eludes any settled definition.

As with music, any discussion of the condition of poetry needs first address the question, *What is poetry?* In any attempt to address this question, several problems unfold and demand consideration. For one, any primary investigation of the definition of poetry raises the problem of origins, and not merely of singular origins but an attendant multiplicity of cultural and historical contexts from which to consider poetry. To ask *What is poetry?* means to elicit an exploration of the historical narratives that create and carry poetries from many languages, from not one but many sources, because poetry seeks diversification, not its inverse. Clearly there is no exhaustive list of such questions generated by an attempt to define the chimera that is 'poetry.'

Perhaps most significantly, however, the question, *What is poetry?* elicits a comparative taxonomy in response: How is poetry distinct from music or the visual arts, for

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[150] Adorno*, Night Music*, 433.

example, and how is poetry similar to or different from these arts? This is the main concern of field of poetics, evident in studies undertaken by writers as diverse as Giorgio Agamben, Susan Stewart, Marjorie Perloff or Roman Jakobson, to name but a few. Moreover, it is the primacy of this aim, Jakobson argues, that grants poetics a preeminent status in the field of literary studies: "Because the subject of poetics is the *differentia specifica* of verbal art in relation to other arts and in relation to other kinds of verbal behavior, poetics is entitled to the leading place in literary studies."[151] Poetics is consumed by this interrogation, with its self-definition, producing a constant re-assessment of the parameters for its objects of study, which are constantly changing. This is in part because the study of poetics presents us with the problematic representation of 'language' itself as the medium of poetry (for example, when compared to music or art); when considered in material terms, it incites an abrupt disorientation in the field of cognition and any comparative definitions.

Adorno's argument against defining art hinges on an essential premise that art is by definition opposed to such instrumental rationality. He carries this argument further to develop his distinctions among music, poetry and visual art, to argue that the essential "riddle-character" of visual art and poetry is hidden by its apparent participation in a medium of cognition (language) or objective representation (visual art). In other words, a certain expectation or threshold of meaning is problematized by the work of poetry, visual art or music, where, according to Adorno's argument, only music enjoys exemption from

[151] Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Belknap Press, 1987), 63.

communicative expectations that might be held out for the other two arts. Unlike poetry and visual art, music is not burdened with provisions of comprehensibility and knowledge.

While Adorno's main purpose in laying out these distinctions is to develop a thesis on the condition of music, one aspect of this comparison proves useful to a discussion of poetry. Simply put, Adorno claims that the "riddle-character" of poetry is concealed by its participation in language, a medium of quotidian communication. Poetry, due to its participation in the medium of cognition, is coded with meaning and should be comprehensible; however, it thwarts or dismantles these expectations. It is problematized as incomprehensible and, in fact, the very inaccessibility that grants writers freedom in their process betrays poetry by relegating it to a marginal section of the bookshelf. The one enduring main argument poetry faces is this: that it is "difficult to understand" or "unintelligible," a charge that many writers, Gertrude Stein among them, have countered. In response to questions about the difficulty of her work, Stein, in a 1934 interview, claimed that intelligibility results from *enjoyment* as a parallel experience of understanding. Poetry needs only be enjoyed to be understood or comprehended. Rather than being premised on an apprehensive potential for explanation and paraphrase, as it is conventionally defined, intelligibility is thus related to pleasure:

> Being intelligible is not what it seems. You mean by understanding that you can talk about it in a way that you have a habit of talking […] but I mean by understanding

enjoyment. If you enjoy it, you understand it, and lots of people have enjoyed it so lots of people have understood it.[152]

Stein releases the notion of the inaccessible opacity of poetic language from conventions and constraints of understanding; in the same gesture, she displaces reading from the strains of epistemological hierarchies. Enjoyment is a freedom and a creative act involving that which could not be known in any other way. In the process, Stein implies that the writerly act of enjoyment is akin to the readerly act of enjoyment. [153]

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[152] Gertrude Stein. Excerpt from a 1934 interview, archived on PennSound. https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Stein/Stein-Gertrude_Interview_1934.mp3. It is notable that Stein's understanding of enjoyment or pleasure as a form of comprehension, expressed in this 1934 interview, anticipates the theory of *jouissance* that was to emerge with French post-structuralism, and particularly in Roland Barthes' *Le Plaisir du texte*.

[153] In a similar spirit of defense, American poet Laura Riding Jackson's original preface to her collected works in 1938 is a well-known response to the charge of "difficulty" she faced from readers. Riding claims that readers need only to read poetry for the right "reasons" — those reasons being the same as the reasons for which poetry is written — to understand it: "The reasons for which poems are read ought not be very different from the reasons for which they are written." Laura Riding, *The Poems of Laura Riding* (New York: Persea Books, 2001), 482. Riding's tautological argument does little to elucidate the nature of these reasons, which are not specified, however Riding does allude to the discovery of truth as an allurement that she associates with the act of reading and writing poetry. Elsewhere, she redefines "the reason" in physical terms, evoking the act of inspiration—that is, an action undetermined by intention but arising in the extreme pull between inertia or lack of motion on the one hand and the compulsion to act that overcomes this inertia on the other: "What are the reasons of poetry—the reasons for writing poems, and for reading them? The physical answer would be: a tremendous compulsion that overcomes a tremendous inertia." *Ibid.,* 487. (Comparatively, Adorno claims that art's reasons must be to defeat themselves.) In a synthesis of the arguments offered by

Regardless, neither pleasure nor enjoyment is commensurate with facility, and nothing in Stein's argument suggests that intelligibility is *easy*. In fact, the very charge of "difficulty" might be offered as the essential characteristic of poetry if we were pressed to define poetry in a non-comparative and ahistorical manner: Poetry is language deployed in a way that pushes semantic limits, explores the vectors of tension that co-extend with the comprehensible potential of a language. In this definition, a key tension resides, first of all, between layers of reference and resonance — or 'meaning,' and secondly, between a discourse that tests the limits of representation and the intelligibility of the language as 'language.' This latter tension is inescapable due to poetry's participation in the medium of cognition that is language, on the one hand, and the non-lexical semantics of music and visual art on the other. However, our definition of poetry would thus be expressed in negative terms — incomprehensible, impossible to understand — rather than in terms that express poetry's qualities of possibility, potentiality and freedom. The main problem here is how resolve these notions of understanding and freedom. Does one renounce the possibility of freedom in the act of understanding or is freedom reconcilable with understanding and intelligibility? Or is it that in poetry's very incomprehensible nature the conditions of freedom are found?

The Freedom of Poiesis

> *La seule liberté, le seul état de liberté que j'ai éprouvé sans réserve, c'est dans la poésie que je l'ai atteint, dans ses larmes et dans l'éclat de quelques êtres venus à moi de trois lointains, celui de l'amour me multipliant.*

Riding and Stein, we might say that the reason for reading and writing poetry must be the same (Riding) and derive from enjoyment (Stein).

— René Char

In the above lyrical excerpt, René Char expresses a belief commonly held among poets (albeit uncommonly expressed): poetry represents the only unrestrained freedom the speaker has ever known. But what is it about writing poetry that sets one free? Further, is the poet's freedom reducible to an individualistic, romantic inner freedom or does its intensity extend beyond the event of making and beyond the isolation of the lyric subject?

Surely, one is not entirely free when writing for another, and more specifically, one is not free when writing according to another's rules, if another has prescribed a purpose to the task of writing. Is one condition of freedom that one has designed the purpose of a work? Or is one only truly free in conditions of purposelessness, to which condition poetry lends itself readily?

It is evident that one must not be fulfilling another's purpose to be free when writing, as much as in any field of experience where freedom to choose is only encumbered by the law of necessity, in turn governed by external economical conditions or legislation. Freedom therefore is connected to the capacity to design one's own formal rules for the architecture of creation. In *The Poet's Freedom*, American poet Susan Stewart follows a line of reasoning proposed by Kant that relates freedom to self-legislation in this way: "Freedom lies thereby in giving one's self one's own law out of one's own essence. Analogously, as the maker or genius gives the rules to art, he or she is enjoying positive freedom in conditions of unusual

intensity."[154] The domain of freedom is drawn in chalk-lines of intensity that fluctuate and that are ephemeral. These intensities flower. They correspond to the maker's capacity to invent the very laws of making, but also to the freedom to circumvent their own laws, to disabuse themself of the law and its containment. Freedom therefore is only connected to the capacity to design one's own formal rules for the architecture of creation if it also entails the capacity to write with a lawlessness that continually reinvents its rules or rejects the notion of intent entirely. The freedom in making thus corresponds to freedom from the constraints of an end-goal or purpose.

Susan Stewart's arguments about poetic and artistic freedom hinge on the premise of an internal field of action, which renders artistic activity distinct from labour and from forces that are in turn external to the worker. She compares Kant's views on self-legislation to a passage in Marx explaining the workers' sense of alienation from their products as a result of their incapacity to self-legislate, their obligation to another's rule, intent and purpose. Stewart points to this comparison despite the differences between labour and work: Whereas labour is monotonous and based on external rules, poiesis corresponds to the capacity of the 'genius,' governed by the conditions of inner freedom. She argues that since making (poiesis) is not a means to serve some other end and is free to be made according to conditions determined in a situation of freedom and self-legislation, it does not result in the maker's alienation, unlike the commodity.

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[154] Susan Stewart, *The Poet's Freedom: A Notebook on Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 11.

While the production of poetry is surely self-governed, does poetry never belong to another? Despite its relative obscurity, is poetry free of the demands of reception? The charge of 'difficulty' would suggest not. While the neutral may be the cornerstone of freedom, readerly insistence on intelligibility as a form of superficial transparency is its most serious antagonist (recall Stein's words: the common readerly demand for so-called 'intelligibility' is in fact a demand for a text that can be paraphrased, a text that the laws of language have legitimized, an utterance considered meaningful because it can be represented in another way).

However, the capacity to form one's own rules is only the first step in achieving the conditions of freedom; the capacity to exceed the limits of self-legislation by writing for *no purpose* (not even to abide the law one has made except insofar as it conditions freedom from purpose) is the complement to this argument. In "What is Freedom?" Hannah Arendt moves beyond the discussion of freedom in terms of the will and intellect — beyond the realm of judgment — to the very principles of inspiration and creation that are at the heart of the poetic endeavour as a free action. Arendt writes about "the freedom to call something into being which did not exist before, which was not given, not even as an object of cognition or imagination, and which therefore, strictly speaking, *could not be known*. Action, to be free, must be free from motive on one side, from its intended goal as a predictable effect on the other."[155] Such an action, she explains, originates in a principle, which operates independently of goals and motives. This principle does not come before or after the action, but emerges with the action itself: "… unlike the judgment of the intellect which precedes action, and unlike the

[155] Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking, 1961), 151. Emphasis mine.

command of the will which initiates it, the inspiring principle becomes fully manifest only in the performing act itself."[156] As such, the principle of inspiration is unrivalled and unique as it coalesces with poetic invention, neither before nor after the act of writing, but in the very performance of writing itself. In adopting this view, we depart from the common notion of inspiration that ties it to hierarchies elaborated in religious thought. According to Arendt's principle, considering what inspiration means for the poet leads us not to the image of the writer subdued by and heeding a greater voice, inscribing dictation received from an otherworldly source — not the dual struggle for mastery and the split between internal and external — instead, the notion of inspiration derives from a creative force that is inextricable from the issuance of performance, the freedom of performance itself, and which begins with the smallest unit, an incomparable and unique principle. Accordingly, freedom arises with the act; there is no freedom without action and one is free as long as one acts. Consequently, the poet does not *have* freedom, as freedom is not something the poet can possess; neither is it a quality to be bequeathed, loaned, given, stolen or purchased. As long as the conditions of writing can be met, the poet *is* free in the event of writing and the event of writing is the poet's freedom. Further, the conditions of the poet's existence are those of writing, and therefore without the conditions of freedom, the poet does not exist. Freedom is not the instigator to action but it is the beginning of action insofar as action is always a beginning and insofar as writing is the poet's beginning.

Significantly, Arendt's description of the creative act as the freedom to create something original supports Stein's claim of poetry's irreducibility to something that has

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[156] *Ibid,*, 152.

already existed. Arendt defines creation as the freedom to call into being something that has not already existed and therefore could not be known. To reiterate, Stein suggests that pleasure and desire form the domain of intelligibility rather than a text's communicability or capacity for paraphrase: "Being intelligible is not what it seems. You mean by understanding that you can talk about it in a way that you have a habit of talking […] but I mean by understanding enjoyment."[157] What has not been previously known cannot be paraphrased in language, cannot be conventionally 'understood' if it cannot be known, if it is not familiar and cannot be represented according to patterns of common language usage. If poetic creation produces something that could not otherwise be known, how could it be represented in any other way? The freedom of the act of poiesis is an articulation of the freedom from anterior knowledge of what one is doing or to what end, and it finds its correlate in the act of reading.

The Freedom of the Neutral

Where is the place of the neutral in poetry's freedom? Poetry's freedom is that it cannot be represented in other words. It resists being captured in another unknowable shape. Its intelligibility is of a form that resists domestication, resists neutralization, resists erasure, resists reduction to the containable and the tame, to the categorical. It announces itself as that which is new to meaning but also possibly as the irrecoverable part of meaning, the impartial part, the present absence of what is not known now. The opacity of transparency is its paradoxical mode of expression; it is of language but it is also the outside surface of language;

[157] See note 140.

its material is the medium of cognition but the act of creation is predicated on freedom from purpose — freedom even from the purpose to communicate in language.

If for Barthes, the neutral represents the desirable uselessness of the lyric, that which cannot be marketed, a desire for pleasure as a purposeless, a continually renewing aim of aimlessness, it is important, in conclusion, to distinguish this neutral from the overwhelming predominance of the 'neutralization' in contemporary usage. Indeed, the neutral is the condition of a freedom that surpasses or thwarts any attempts at neutralization.

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